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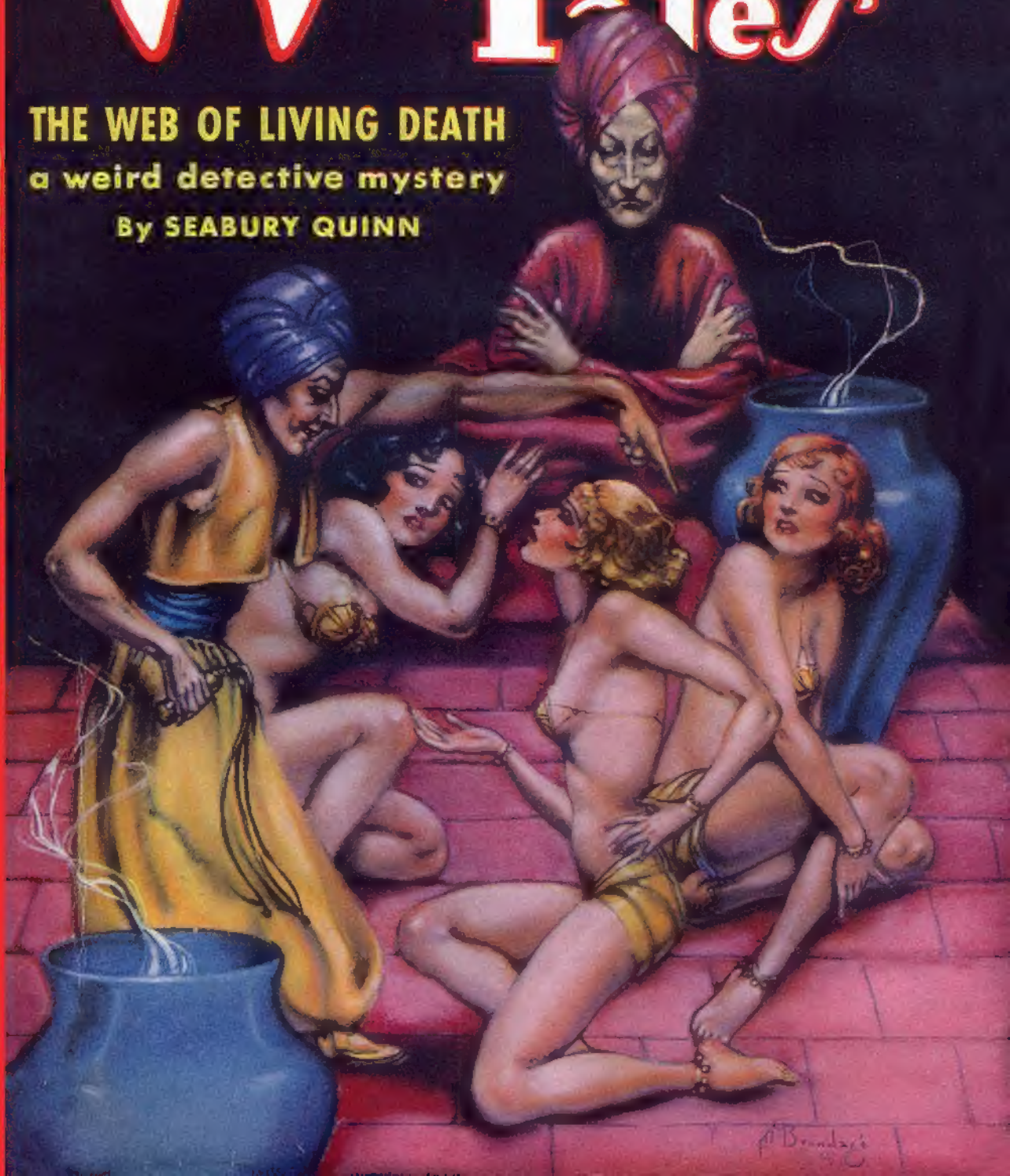
Weird Tales

THE WEB OF LIVING DEATH

a weird detective mystery

By SEABURY QUINN



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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Pandemonium followed chaos."

The Web of Living Death

By SEABURY QUINN

A terror-tale of a strange house in the swamp—a weird tale of stark horror and eery happenings

"I WOULDN'T take the Shore Road tonight, sir," the filling-station attendant screwed the radiator cap in place and paused, one foot on the car step, a half-serious, half-stubborn look upon his honest, freckled face. "It's five miles longer by the inside way, but——"

"What's the matter, paving up?" asked Merrill as he tamped an ounce of tobacco into his pipe bowl. "There's nothing in the guide to indicate——"

"No, sir, nothing's wrong with the

paving," the other admitted. "It's an all-right road to drive on in the daytime, but—well, sir, you can go that way if you want to, of course, but *I* wouldn't drive across them marshes after dark for sumpin pretty."

"I guess I'll take a chance," said Merrill, setting his pipe alight and shooting his self-starter. "Be seeing you."

A gibbous moon rode high in a sea of mackerel clouds, and from the marshes, slashed and crisscrossed with tidal creeks, a steadily thickening bank of low-lying, miasmic mist marched shoreward. "H'm, maybe that young 'un knew what he was talking about, after all," Merrill murmured to himself, throttling down his engine. "It'll be thicker than pea soup in half an hour, not so good for speed——"

"Going my way, brother?" The questioner loomed beside the road amid the gathering mists, feet wide apart, thumb cocked in the familiar gesture of the hitch-hiker. A broad and most ingratiating grin was on his face.

"Er, yes, I suppose so," Merrill answered, surveying the other between narrowed lids. "Hop in."

"Thanks, I will," the young man answered laconically, clambering nimbly into the seat without troubling to open the roadster's door. Then, as Merrill put on speed: "Take it slow along here; I tried to do a Barney Oldfield half an hour ago. My puddle-jumper's mired hub-deep back there."

"Umph?" Merrill cast a sidelong, appraising glance at his companion as he eased the flow of gas. He was a very big young man, easily six feet in height, and broad proportionately. His face was deeply tanned, his blue eyes set amid a web of fine sun-wrinkles, his corduroy suit and high laced boots liberally overlaid with swamp-ooze.

"I tried to dig her out myself," he explained with a deprecating glance at his muddied clothes, "but it was no go. I'll send back a wrecking-car tomorrow morning if——" he paused reflectively, surveying the fog-shrouded scenery.

"Yes, if——" Merrill prompted sharply.

"If we ever get any place," the other answered with a cheerful grin. "This stretch of road's not exactly what you'd call a health resort and—hold hard, man; down brakes!"

Looming through the swirling mist, not fifty feet away, the headlights of another car bore down on them.

Merrill wrenched his wheel abruptly, swinging his car violently to the right; the opposing headlights swerved left and came directly at him. Instinctively he bore his foot down on the brake, stopping with a grinding squeal, and as he

● Seabury Quinn, creator of Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker and occultist, who for years has been the most fascinating detective of modern fiction, leaves the mercurial little Frenchman for a while and introduces a new hero in this story, "The Web of Living Death." He is Thomas Carter, whose occupation it is to investigate mysterious disappearances for life insurance companies. In this weird detective mystery his powers are put to a severe test, for the utterly unusual happenings of this tale are unique in fiction or in fact. This novelette, which is published complete in this issue, will hold your eyes glued to the printed page, with its breath-taking suspense, vivid action, dangerous episodes and strange events. We recommend the story to you.

halted, the headlights which confronted him abruptly disappeared, leaving him gazing up a long, deserted stretch of road, nothing visible for miles but the tall, brown grasses of the salt marshes, the ever-moving banks of fog, and the great tree which stood alone and sentinel-like beside the roadway where the other car had been.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle; I sure will!" his passenger declared. "You saw it, too, didn't you?"

"Saw it? Of course I did!" Merrill answered tartly. "What——"

"Well, then, if I'm cuckoo, so are you. We'll be company for each other in the padded cell," the big young man grinned at him as he swung a leg over the side of the car.

"Where are you going?" Merrill asked, his scalp and neck still tingling with uncanny thrills.

"Just to do a little snooping. Motor cars don't jump out at you like the bogy man, then do a disappearing act, you know. Come on, want to have a look?"

"I—yes, of course," said Merrill, drawing up his knees as he wormed past the steering-wheel. "Be with you in a——"

He saw his guest stride quickly toward the tree, saw him thrust a hand beneath the skirt of his long jacket, heard his sudden shouted "Look out!" then saw no more as a blight of Stygian darkness fell upon him, smothering back the startled breath that rushed into his throat, and the cloyingly sweet scent of heavy fumes assailed his nostrils.

FAR away, a hundred million miles away, it seemed, a bright star winked at Merrill. It grew and widened, like the headlight of a locomotive rushing down the track, ceased flickering, became the steady glow of a big lamp. Merrill raised himself and looked about him. He lay upon a sort of ottoman covered with red cloth, and everywhere he looked the ruddy color was repeated. The room was big, some forty feet in length by twenty broad, its walls hung with crimson brocade, its tiled floor covered with a crimson carpet. About the walls, set shoulder-high, and reminding Merrill of a sacrilegious parody of the stations of the cross set in a church, were little niches, each some eighteen inches wide by two feet high, framed and lined with polished ebony. Each niche contained a statuette wrought in gleaming marble. Each differed from the others, yet all had one thing in common: not one revealed a face. Some countenances were hidden by long, disheveled hair, some obscured by masks or the raised beavers of mediæval helmets; one female statue wore a veil, another bowed its face into its outspread fingers as though it wept hysterically.

At the apartment's farther end was a high archway hung with scarlet curtains, and on either side of this, as though they mounted guard, were suits of Saracenic armor, each grasping a bare simitar in its right gauntlet, each with the hideous visage of a skull peering out from underneath the pointed cap of polished steel. From the ceiling hung a heavy lamp of hammered bronze, which was the light which Merrill saw when he first wakened.

"Uh-uh, ain't this sumpin?" a voice came to him from across the scarlet room.

He raised his head again and beheld his late traveling companion sitting on a couch which was the duplicate of his, his face clasped in his hands while he rocked his body slowly to and fro.

"If I hadn't seen it, I never woulda believed it," he solemnly announced, rising unsteadily to his feet and gazing round the room. "Yes, sir, this is certainly a case of seeing being believing—maybe. Take those fellers over there, for

instance." He nodded toward the skeletons in armor. "Would you believe that you could see such things as that and still be sober? I——"

"What happened?" Merrill interjected.

"Your guess is as good as mine, maybe better. I'd just got down to take a little look-see when I thought I saw a feller climbing over the back of your car and yelled to you to duck. That's what comes of altruism. If I'd been 'tending to my own knitting they wouldn't have pulled the well-known bag over my head; not without a struggle, anyway. Next thing I knew"—he waved a big, well-cared-for hand in an all-embracing gesture—"here we are."

"So I see," conceded Merrill tartly. "The next question is how are we to get out. I'll be hanged if I stay here one more minute——"

"Then you will certainly be hanged, I fear," a voice as soft as the purring of a cat—or the hissing of a snake—cut in, and as Merrill and his erstwhile passenger spun round they saw that a section of the scarlet wall had folded back, revealing a blind doorway in which a man was standing.

He was in evening dress, the immaculate linen and prim black broadcloth of his costume contrasting oddly with the turban of red silk which swathed his head. He might have been a Jew, perhaps an Armenian or Turk, for his face was dark, his features large and somewhat heavy, though not coarse, and the dark brown eyes beneath his heavy, high-arched brows were extraordinarily bright. There was a menacing, impenetrable, unfathomable expression in them as he bent his gaze upon the other two.

"Yes," he added with a low, sardonic chuckle, "if you are to be hanged for remaining longer than a minute, I fear you had better prepare your neck for the halter, my dear sir. You may feel it any moment, for that matter. Whether you do or not depends upon your actions and your capabilities."

"Who are you?" demanded Merrill, taking a quick step forward.

"Who are you, is more to the point," the other answered, and the smile faded from his face, leaving it instinct with cruelty.

"I refuse to answer any questions," began Merrill, but before he could continue the turbaned man struck his hands together softly, and from the passage at his back there strode two giant blacks, entirely naked save for turbans and small aprons of black silk, each carrying a heavy whip of plaited rawhide, its fourfold lashes terminating in small iron hooks.

"Will you answer, or must I use persuasion?" asked the man in evening dress, and his eyes were hard as frozen pools of ink, while underneath the softness of his voice there lay a cutting-edge of menace.

"You win," answered the young man Merrill had befriended. "My name's Carter; Thomas Eldridge Carter; age, twenty-six; profession, accountant, at present unemployed; residence, New York. How I got here you know a dam' sight better than I. Anything else?"

"Do unemployed accountants usually go armed with pistols and blackjacks, Mr. Carter?" asked the turbaned man.

"They do when they're traveling through lonely parts of Long Island," answered Carter; "though for all the use I made of mine, I might as well have left the hardware home," he added with a grin.

The other ignored his pleasantry and turned a threatening glance on Merrill. "Will you answer?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm Melancthon Merrill, instructor in political philosophy at Norwood Col-

lege," answered Merrill. "My special subject is ancient and mediæval civilizations, and——"

"You are familiar with the civilization —the manners and customs—of mediæval Syria?" cut in the other.

"Yes, to some extent. I——"

"Very well; we can find a place for you, no doubt.

"As to you," he turned to Carter, "I fear that we shall find small use for you professionally. Did you engage in athletics while at college?"

"Varsity football, basketball, track team——" young Carter catalogued tersely, but:

"That will do; there will be room for you," the other interrupted.

"Zit!" the voice spoke abruptly to the black colossi, who dodged back through the open door.

THERE was a gentle, rustling sound, as of silk brushing silk, and where the door had been was only the brocaded wall. Next instant, like a dropping eyelid, the light winked out, and they felt the suffocating weight of utter darkness fall on them. A faintly hissing noise, like steam escaping from a kettle, sounded in the darkness, and the nauseatingly sweet odor of the anesthetic which had rendered him unconscious on the road came to Merrill's nostrils. "Carter, Carter, where are you?" he cried in sudden panic.

"Right here, Professor, where Moses was when the lights went out, I reckon," Carter's cheerful voice responded.

"They're gassing us. That——"

"You're telling me?" Tom Carter interrupted. "Got your handkerchief?"

"Yes," Professor Merrill fumbled at his jacket pocket, dragging out the linen square.

"Good enough. Tie it round your mouth and nose. It won't help much, but it may help a little. All fixed? All right, let's try to make a break. That doorway by the skeletons might lead us somewhere."

Slowly, making heavy-footed progress as the anesthetic dulled his senses, Merrill crossed the room, found Carter's hand and grasped it firmly, then began a stumbling walk toward the doorway guarded by the armored liches.

"Careful, now," warned Carter as they felt the cool steel of the chain-mail and circled round the grisly guardians, "there may be some trick to this; it wouldn't do to have one of those swords come down and slice us."

Fighting hard for breath, Merrill volunteered no answer as with weakening knees he reached the archway, swept aside the scarlet curtains and felt frantically for the fastenings of the door. Only smoothly polished wood met his searching fingers, and with a sob of disappointment he swayed drunkenly, clutched the curtains for support, then felt himself grasped roughly by the elbow and dragged across the threshold. Feeling on the portal's farther side, Carter's hands had grasped a latch of hammered bronze, wrenched it savagely and unbarred the door.

"Well, I'm a baboon's cousin, I sure am!" announced Carter with conviction as they closed the door behind them and, leaning back against its polished planks, drank in deep drafts of fresh, untainted air.

"Where are we now?" asked Merrill, gulping down another lungful of revivifying air.

"Somewhere East of Suez, judging by the get-up of that Boy Scout we just talked to," Carter answered. "Come on, let's be moving. That get-away of ours was too easy; there's a catch to it some-

where, or I'm an ape's great-grandfather."

The room they stood in was considerably larger than the red-walled chamber they had quit. Its walls were marble or some sort of tile, pierced on three sides by low Moorish arches. Its floor was composed of alternating plinths of black and white, covered for the most part by a heavy carpet of black or some dark color which they were unable to determine, since the sole illumination of the vast apartment was a little lamp with shade of perforated bronze beneath which orchid glass was set, toning down the light till it was but a faint shade brighter than the darkness of the room behind them. Between the arches and against the solid wall were set what looked like couches piled with pillows shaped like giant mushrooms. Throughout the place there hovered perfume, not the sweet and cloying scent of the anesthetic they had fled, but something subtle, faint, intoxicating, like the delicately suggestive scent of ambergris.

"If this don't beat the devil," began Carter, then paused, his right hand lifted as against a blow.

Across the darkness from the great room's farther side there came a low and sobbing moan, a sound so filled with terror mixed with sorrow that it might have been the lamentation of a soul in hell.

Nodding swift command to Merrill, Carter took a quick step forward, then paused abruptly, his hand on his companion's arm. "That carpet doesn't look so good to me," he announced in an almost soundless whisper. "Too many choice places for trap-doors under it. Let's go round the long way."

Skirting the rug, treading warily on the marble pavement, lest a block give way beneath their feet, they hastened along two sides of the room, then paused to listen a moment. The moan which told them they were not alone had not been repeated, and in the tense, unbroken silence they could almost hear the beating of each other's hearts. Then the faintest echo of a sound, the gentle rustling of a couch cover, or perhaps of a pillow being moved, led them toward the nearest archway.

CARTER fumbled through his pockets; then, with an exultant sigh: "Here's one—just one," he announced. "They surely cleaned us out, but somehow they overlooked this one." A scratching on his boot sole, and a match-flame blossomed into orange light. For a moment it glared against their eyes with the blinding brilliance of full sunlight; then as the sputtering flare grew steady as it took hold of the wood, the men fell backward simultaneously with a gasp of stark astonishment upon their lips.

A face, a woman's face, sad, beautiful and frightened, looked up at them across the match-flame. The eyes were blue, shading to violet tints, large, fringed with curling lashes, moist and weary with tears. Her chestnut hair, with deep, shadow-laden waves, was cut squarely across her forehead in front, almost level with her delicately arching brows; at the sides and back it was cropped off in a straight line which barely left her ear lobes visible. The nose was small and delicate with slender nostrils, the lips full, gently arched and rouged a brilliant red; the ivory pallor of her cheeks was enhanced by the shadow of long, silken lashes. Save for a pair of Oriental breastplates done in silver filigree and harnessed round her shoulders with fine silver chains, broad silver slave-bracelets hung with tiny bells and a pair of bell-hung anklets, she was nude, a lovely statuette of pallid flesh and shadow

against the purple robe and pillows of the couch.

The fingers of one hand, stained brilliant red from nails to knuckles, were pressed against her mouth as though to stifle back a cry, and over them the wide, black-fringed eyes dilated in the sudden glare of match-light. The hand slid downward from her mouth and rested on her throat, as though to ease the passage of the breath which halted there.

"Wh—who are you?" she whispered thickly as the match-flame flickered and went out. Then, before the men could answer:

"What are you doing here? Have they discovered you? Oh—quick, before they find you, kill me—kill me quickly, for pity's sake!"

"Take it easy, sister," urged Tom Carter. "Who—what are you?"

"Dale Car—O God, I forgot! Zil-i-Gulab is my name. I'm a slave."

"A what? Haven't you heard of Marse Lincoln's proclamation——"

The girl broke in with frightened haste. "You've only just come here; you don't understand. I'm a slave, I tell you, a helpless, willess chattel; I have no right to speak or act, not even to think, except as I am ordered, and death by torture follows disobedience!"

"H'm, not so good," Tom Carter murmured thoughtfully. "How'd you get into this jam?"

"I was driving in from Great South Bay one night, I don't remember just how long ago—one loses count of time in here—and just as I came to a big tree by the salt marshes I saw another car coming head-on at me. I swerved to the right, and it swerved, too. I knew there'd be a crash unless I left the road, so I steered into the marsh. The car turned over in the ditch, and when I came to I was here, stripped naked, with these rings fastened in my ears"—she raised her hand to touch the four-inch silver hoops which pierced her ear lobes—"and they told me I must stay here always and do exactly as they told me, or they'd torture me to death. They'll do it, too—I saw a girl—oh, please, if you've sisters of your own and they mean anything to you, kill me; choke me, break my neck, do anything—only kill me before——

"S-s-sh!" she paused abruptly, finger raised to lips. "Somebody's coming. Quick, hide behind the couch. If they catch you here your lives aren't worth a puff of smoke."

Reluctantly but swiftly Merrill and Carter dropped between the couch and wall, and scarcely had they found concealment when the shuffle of soft shoes against the marble pavement told them that the girl's quick hearing had not been mistaken.

Even in the dim, uncertain light they saw the newcomer was hideous. Stooped and bent with the unmistakable deformity of a hunchback, his body was nevertheless broad and powerful, and the hands which hung down well below his knees were of extraordinary size and obviously strong as those of a gorilla. The hairy, pock-marked face, the inflamed eyelids, the fangs that gleamed from receding gums together formed a countenance repulsive as a mediæval artist's conception of the Devil. An enormous turban of blue silk was swathed about the creature's head; loose, baggy trousers of canary yellow, gathered tightly at the ankles, encased his nether limbs; upon his broad and splay-boned feet were slippers of soft leather. In one hand he bore a three-lashed whip of plaited rawhide, each lash tipped with a small bead of iron.

As the visitant came through the arch the girl sprang nimbly from her couch,

dropped to her knees, crossed her feet one above the other, then fell forward on her face, arms trailing backward beside her prostrate body, the hands lying palm-upward in sign of absolute submission.

The hunchback looked at her a moment, then stepping forward thrust a slippered foot against her face as a cruel master might spurn a cringing dog. "Art ready, creature?" he demanded in a high-pitched, cackling voice.

"Harkening and obedience, master of my breath," the girl responded meekly.

"It is well. Two more recruits have come to join the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces. We must make them welcome with our usual hospitality. Come, example of unparalleled uncouthness, and see that thou playest thy part with ardor."

He turned upon his heel and the girl rose silently and followed him, eyes cast demurely down, arms close at sides, wrists bent, hands held out sharply at right angles to her body.

"WELL, I'll adopt an orphan kangaroo!" Carter muttered as the tinkle of the girl's ankle-bells faded to an echo. "Can you imagine a snatch racket like that being pulled on the South Shore of Long Island in the Twentieth Century?"

"Carter," Merrill told him solemnly, "I think we're up against the biggest thing that's been known here since the Molly Maguires terrorized Pennsylvania. Did you hear what that hunchback told that girl?"

"H'm," Carter scratched his chin reflectively. "He told her to do her stuff, for they'd signed up two new members of the lodge—meaning you and me, I take it, and——"

"Precisely. And——"

"I don't think I quite follow you, Professor."

"Perhaps you don't; the reference might have been obscure. Did you ever hear of the Sheik Al-Jebal, the Old Man of the Mountain?"

"Why, sure. He's a character in the *Arabian Nights,* isn't he? The one Sinbad the Sailor met——"

"He certainly was not," Professor Merrill contradicted. "He was the absolute ruler of the greatest and most dreaded secret organization of the Middle Ages, the order of Assassins, which was the terror of the world for two centuries. Because they had their headquarters on Mount Lebanon, their ruler was referred to by the Crusaders as the Old Man of the Mountain. His Arabic title was Sheik Al-Jebal, Master of the Mountain, and——"

Carter snapped his fingers sharply. "I get it!" he announced. "That understudy to the Black Crook said, 'Two new recruits to the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces!' Whoever heads this outfit is carrying on the reincarnation of that old geezer from Mount Lebanon. Boy, are we in with one swell bunch of murderers, or are we in with 'em?"

"I rather think we are," responded the professor with a wry grimace, "and if I'm not mistaken, they're looking for us now."

Even as he spoke there came the thud of slippers on the marble floor, and a squad of turbaned warriors armed with gleaming simitars crowded through an archway.

"Jig's up, Professor, nothing for it but to give 'em the works," said Carter cheerfully, leaping from the shelter of the couch and facing their pursuers.

"Come and get it, you gazabos," he invited, snatching the cover from the nearest couch and twirling it before him

as a toreador whirls his cloak to lure the bull to charge.

Startled by his strange maneuver of defense, no less than by his sudden appearance, the armed men hesitated for a second, and while they bunched together at the doorway Carter threw the robe, enveloping the heads of the four nearest to him. With a bellow he was on them, striking flailing fist-blows, kicking viciously, shouting wild defiance.

Professor Merrill grasped a pillow from the nearest couch, and holding it before him as a shield rushed on a swordsman who escaped the robe that Carter flung. The man swung at him with his gleaming blade; Merrill caught the down-stroke on his pillow, and ere his enemy could raise his simitar to strike again, kicked him in the stomach, seized the weapon which fell clattering to the floor, and rushed to Carter's aid.

"Atta baby, Prof!" yelled Carter as he swung an uppercut which sent a turbaned swordsman doubled up against the wall: "Give 'em the business. We'll stand these babies up—duck! they're flanking us!"

The warning came a thought too late. While they engaged the squad of guards, another party had slipped through an archway, circled round them and, as Carter yelled, descended on them from the rear.

Professor Merrill staggered backward, tripping as he reeled, felt the semi-darkness deepen to absolute blackness as a pall descended on his head, and once more smelled the sweetish, pungent odor of the anesthetic which had overcome him on the road. He heard Tom Carter choke and gasp as he, too, fell a victim to the rear attack, seemed to feel his head expanding like a rubber bladder pumped with air, beheld a myriad flashing lights before his eyes, then buckled at the knees and sank down limply on the purple carpet, like a doll from which the sawdust has run out.

With a start like that of one who wakens at the cachinnation of an alarm clock, Professor Merrill came to consciousness. He was lying on a couch which stood some eighteen inches from the floor of a small whitewashed room illuminated by a swinging three-wicket brazen lamp hung pendant from the ceiling. Another couch like his against the farther wall, a little table of dark wood inlaid with brass and holding trays of fruits and sweetmeats, and a thin, hard Hamadan carpet seemed to be the room's sole furnishings.

"Carter!" he called. "Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

"Mr. Carter's quite all right, Professor," came a soft voice from the arching doorway. "He did some injury to our men before they could subdue him, but, except for ruffled dignity, I think he suffered nothing."

Turning on his pillow Merrill recognized the speaker as the man whom they had met when first recovering consciousness after their kidnapping. He had changed his Occidental evening clothes for a long, tight-fitting garment of white linen on the left breast of which was stamped or painted the device of a scarlet, hiltless dagger. Instead of patent-leather evening pumps he wore soft slippers of red leather with exaggeratedly turned-up toes. His turban was replaced by a red fez at least a full size large for him, so that it rested almost on his ears. As he turned his head Professor Merrill saw the scalp below his fez was innocent of hair. The man was bald as an egg.

"Where——" began Professor Merrill, then checked abruptly as he sat bolt-upright on his couch. His clothes were

gone, and in their place was a knee-length sleeveless garment of white linen, bound about the middle with a scarlet sash, blazoned on the left breast with the design of a scarlet dagger. Beside his bed he saw a red tarboosh and a pair of heelless red Morocco slippers.

"I say——" involuntarily the professor raised a hand to his head, then brought it down with an exclamation of dismay. Instead of curling brown hair, lightly mixed with gray, his fingers had encountered naked, smooth-shaved scalp.

"My clothes—my hair——" he stammered wrathfully, his anger rendering him almost incoherent..

The other smiled, not pleasantly. "I shouldn't use the possessive case if I were you, Professor," he advised. "Everything here, including your clothes, your hair and yourself, is the absolute property of the Master"—as he spoke the name he crossed his hands upon his breast, closed his eyes and bowed his head in reverence —"to do with as he pleases.

"And while we are about it, you will hereafter be known as Iskandar. Is that plain? Once one has had the ineffable honor of being accepted as the Master's slave his other worldly attributes are cast aside; he has no name, no title, no individuality, no right to live, save as it may please the Master to bestow them. All things here are his, to give or take away."

"I'll be damned——" began Professor Merrill, but the other cut him short.

"You will surely think yourself in hell, whether you are damned or not, if you have occasion to encounter the dispensers of discipline. Come, follow me; a little object lesson may suffice to break your stubborn pride."

Reluctantly, but filled with curiosity, Merrill rose and donned his fez and slippers. They passed along a narrow, lamp-lit corridor, passed half a dozen guarded doors, finally began descending a steep spiral stair which led down in a sort of well. Seventy steps, each about a foot in height, Merrill counted before his guide halted at a door of heavy planks cross-barred with iron, and rapped upon it sharply.

As the portal swung before them on a pair of creaking hinges a dank, damp odor, reminiscent of a cellar—or a tomb —assailed their nostrils, and from the darkness of the vault there came a little sobbing, whimpering sound, as though a child were suffering.

"Lights, O monstrous uncouthness!" growled the guide, and in a moment came the click of flint on steel, the glow of tinder set afire, finally the thin, unsteady gleaming of a candle-lantern.

THE man who held the light was scarcely visible, his form looming dimly indistinct, like a shadow thrown upon a shadow, but Professor Merrill's interest in the lantern-bearer ceased as he beheld the form the feeble light shone on.

It was a girl, young, beautiful, exquisitely fashioned, but so racked with pain and helpless agony that she scarcely seemed a human thing. Her feet were fixed in stocks set some two feet from the floor, her body was supported on her upright arms. Beneath her, where her head and shoulders must inevitably rest when the weakening arms could no longer support her body weight, was a plank thick set with eight-inch, needle-pointed spikes. A mass of pockmark-wounds, thick with drying blood, upon her neck and shoulders told where she had once let herself down for an instant's respite, then forced her tortured arms once more to raise her pain-racked body to the level of her feet.

"She disobeyed an order," Merrill's guide said softly. "Those who fail to do

the instant bidding of the Master or the servants who transmit his orders get no second chance. She has been here for three hours. She should not last——"

"*Yah Sidi,* kill me; kill me quickly, for the memory of your mother!" begged the girl through writhing lips. "I can't stand it——"

"O countenance of misfortune, this is thine own doing," answered Merrill's guide. "Our lord was very merciful; he forgave thy first transgression with no more punishment than the lash, but he has no use for those who scorn his clemency. Pray for death, daughter of a pig; it is thy sole chance of release."

The girl's eyes widened in the candlelight. Her small, white teeth clinched on her lower lip until a little stream of mixed blood and spittle trickled down her chin. "Damn you!" she screamed; "damn you for the rotten beasts you are!" and bent her arms till the biceps stood out in little knots against her pallid skin. A moment she poised thus, then straightened both her arms, forcing her body upward in a little spring, and let herself fall back.

The muscles of her torso rippled in reflex reaction as the cruel spikes pierced her back and neck, but she gave no cry. Merrill felt a wave of nausea sweeping over him, but checked it as he realized death had dealt her quick release. He knew enough anatomy to convince him that a spike had pierced her spinal column, severing it at once and bringing instant surcease of all suffering.

"Too bad," remarked his guide. "I must have the torture-master whipped for that; those spikes should be so placed that prisoners undergoing torture can't kill themselves so easily." He chuckled softly; then:

"That is just a little object lesson, Iskandar. Should you prove difficult we might give you a worse punishment than that. For instance——" he laid a hand upon Professor Merrill's arm and drew him toward a narrow door pierced with an iron grille. "Look in," he ordered tersely.

As the attendant flashed the lantern rays into the darkened chamber Merrill glimped a movement in the shadow, then heard a low, warning hiss. Half coiled upon the sand with which the little room was floored, but undulating in knots and bends and subtle figure-eights, was a great python, fully twenty feet in length.

"He's hungry, you see," the guide advised him with a laugh. "He eats but once in thirty days or so, and we haven't had a prisoner for him in some time. Think of that, Iskandar. Remember that the Master's little pet is hungry—very hungry—if you feel an inclination to disobey the slightest order which is given you. Shall we go? Your friend Mansur—he who was Thomas Carter—will be returning soon, and you'll be interested in hearing his experiences, as he will be in hearing yours."

When Tom Carter opened his eyes they looked upon a garden, or rather on the simulation of a garden. In a long, vaulted hall whose ceiling, painted blue, was pierced with little star-shaped holes through which soft light-rays filtered, was spread a heavy carpet of dull green, while here and there stood wide-mouthed vases, big as tubs, in which were set orange, palm or rose trees, all cunningly finished to simulate the living growths. White pigeons perched in the trees, or walked about beneath them, heads bobbing, wings aflutter, pausing now and then to utter resonant coos and engage in violent love-making. Here and there beneath the trees were little bright-hued rugs, and on them men were lying.

Drunk, they seemed at first, yet at a second glance he decided otherwise. Rather, it seemed, they were mad, or held in some strange seizure, for they lay there, staring at the artificial sky, muttering strange, half-audible phrases of endearment, while on their faces were expressions of wild, unholy rapture. Sometimes they rose with difficulty and lurched a few unsteady steps with outspread hands until their arms closed as though enfolding an invisible form, and as they acted this strange pantomime they babbled incoherent words through lips so flaccid that they could not frame the syllables they sought to say.

"Tommy, old scout, you're in a bughouse, no doubt of it," he told himself, watching a near-by man rise, stagger a few steps and fall. But:

"What the cross-eyed devil?" he ejaculated softly as he saw an unclothed woman glide out from the shelter of a bank of potted palms, kneel a moment at the fallen man's head and whisper in his ear. Then from a silver jar she detached the wide-mouthed silver goblet which served it as a lid, poured out a draft of amber-colored liquor and held it up to the man's mouth, supporting his head in the crook of her free elbow as a mother might hold up the head of a sick child to whom she gave a dose of medicine.

The man drank greedily, held up his hands to stroke the fair cup-bearer's cheeks, but fell back in a sort of swoon, lying rigidly upon his rug, staring sightlessly with wide-set, dreamy eyes up to the painted ceiling.

"Well, I should kiss a small-sized monkey!" muttered Carter, sitting up upon his rug. "If that bird ain't—hey, what the sizzling hell?" Sitting, he discovered that his legs and feet were bare, and that a sleeveless linen smock, close-belted with a sash of crimson silk, replaced the garments he had worn. He dropped back to the rug, staring at the branches of the imitation rose tree under which he lay; then: "What's the matter with my head?" he asked, sat up again and raised a hand to the back of his neck. His fingers traveled upward, clear across the vault of his skull, down to his forehead, encountering no resistance. "Well, I'll be a Republican in Mississippi! Bald!" he exclaimed. Half rising from his rug, he sat again in utter, stupefied amazement.

The tinkling chime of silver anklebells fell on his ears as three girls ran swiftly into view. Like the girl whom he and Merrill had discovered earlier, they were naked, save for silver ornaments on breast and wrist and ankle, and in their youthful nakedness their beauty was so poignant that it struck him like a blow. One bore a zither, another wore small silver cymbals on her thumbs and forefingers, the third held poised between her delicate, long-fingered hands a crystal goblet fashioned like a lotus bud, and in it glowed an amber-colored liquor.

Kneeling on the grass-green carpet at his feet, the women smiled at him seductively, and as the zither-player struck her cords and the cymbal-wearer clashed her little silver plates together with a chiming, clinking rhythm which beat out the tempo, the girl who bore the cup began to sing in a high, thin soprano:

The nightingale sings in the rose tree,
  The moon breasts the surf of the sky,
And the glance of thine eyes holds me bound in
    a thrall,
  For the slave of thy passion am I.

A girdle to bind round thy waist,
  Or a brooch at thy throat I would be,
Or I'd turn to the shoe which is happily placed
  On thy foot to be trod by thee. . . .

And now soft, scented arms slipped round his neck, and a woman's cheek

touched his, while a woman's soft hands turned his face from the musicians and her lips sought his in breathless eagerness. As she kissed him she opened her mouth, and the scent of her breath was the scent of perfumed wine, stirring his befuddled senses, rousing his pulses to a furious drum-beat of desire.

"O moon of my delight, O heart of a thousand roses," the girl whispered between kisses almost fierce as bites, "O essence of apples in the sweetness of full summer—*now do you realize why I asked you to kill me in that room back there?* O bringer of delights—*I must do this with any man they say, or perish by the death of spikes or by the snake*—lie in my arms, beloved, cool thy hot face between my bosoms—*for God's sake, realize I'm forced to this and be kind to me*—O song of the nightingale, O perfume of the jasmine flower—*don't swallow any of the wine; hold it in your mouth and pretend to get drunk quickly!*" She signed to the woman with the cup, took it from her and held it to his lips.

He followed her instructions, drinking in the strong, musk-scented wine, holding it in his mouth till he thought his cheeks would burst. The girl leant over him, interposing herself between him and the others; as he finished drinking she flung the cup across her shoulder, wrapped him in her arms, pressing her slender perfumed body close to his as she bore him backward.

"Quick," she whispered fiercely as his shoulders touched the rug, "lean over me, pretend to kiss me, and let the wine run from your mouth into mine." She twined herself about him, bending her head and shoulders to the side until his face was over hers, the back of his shaven head hiding their lips from the other women. "Now!" she commanded, placing opened lips against his mouth.

Carter drew his lips apart, felt the flow of perfumed wine across them, sensed, rather than saw, that the girl had turned her face aside, letting the liquor spill from her mouth onto the green carpet. Then she was kissing him again, whispering almost soundlessly between caresses: "I've saved your soul—for a little while—now pretend to be unconscious. Don't close your eyes, just lie here like the other men and seem to dream!"

"O. K., sister, I get you," he replied, giving her a quick kiss in return, then slowly loosed his hold upon her shoulders, let his hands fall flaccidly beside him, finally lay staring with wide eyes up at the painted ceiling.

"Hou," laughed the girl who played the zither, "the wine worked quickly with that one. By Allah, were I a man I should not let thee go so quickly, little Zil-i-Gulab, though they gave me wine enough to drown a whale!"

Carter had not watched the other men in vain. For something like five minutes he lay staring at the vaulted roof, then began to mutter vaguely, half rose from his couch, dropped back again, hiding his face upon his folded arms and occasionally kicking restlessly, like a sleeper troubled in his dreams.

"Smart girl," he told himself, gradually working his sleeping-rug over the spot of moisture left when she spat out the wine. "That stuff was drugged, no doubt of it; that's why those birds act so cuckoo. And they make her act like that—the poor kid! I'd like to wring their necks! Guess it's my best bet to lie here quietly, though, and see what happens next."

He rested his cheek upon his folded arm and stared across the green-floored room, nor was it the drugged wine that brought the dreamy look into his eyes. Soft arms about his neck, soft, scented

lips on his, the thrill of love words whispered close against his mouth—even if she had done it because they made her it was sweet, he told himself. Suppose they hadn't forced her to make love to him, would she——

A SHUFFLING step beside him woke him from his revery and he looked up to behold the man whom he and Merrill had encountered in the red room standing by him, smiling. "Are you able to stand, Mansur?" he asked with a knowing laugh.

"Mansur?" echoed Carter.

"That is your name henceforth," the other answered with a sudden tightening of his lips. "See that you recognize it when you hear it called."

"O. K.," responded Carter. "What's next?" He sat up unsteadily, holding his hands against his temples. "Gosh, that's powerful stuff—guess I took a little bit too much," he confided with a shamefaced grin.

"Your companion Iskandar is waiting in your chamber," his guide informed him as they traversed a long corridor. "Tomorrow you and he shall stand before the Presence to receive your orders. You will probably be assigned to the guard, for you are a good fighter."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd like to have a job that'll keep me in touch with that little bimbo I met back in the garden," Carter answered.

"Silence!" snapped the other. "All things are as the Master"—he bowed his head in homage—"wills. The favors of the women of the garden are bestowed as a reward of merit, and the woman in whose arms you lie is she the Master chooses. For those who prove refractory we have other methods of reward. Iskandar will tell you of it."

"Who the deuce is Iskandar?"

"The man who came here with you. And you must no longer address me so familiarly. I am majordomo of the palace, and as such am called Excellence or, when spoken to directly, *yah Sidi.* Do you understand?"

"O. K.," responded Carter, and next instant started back with flaming cheeks, for his guide had struck him in the face.

"Do you need the lash to teach you humbleness, or have you learned to speak becomingly?" snarled the guide.

Carter's right hand knotted to a fist, but better judgment conquered anger. "Yes, *yah Sidi,*" he replied.

A slave was kneeling on the marble pavement at the passage bend, a little, paunchy man with shaven head, clothed only in a breech-clout. Beside him was a pail of soapy water, in one hand he held a cloth with which he scrubbed the marble tiles, and as he worked the tears fell from his eyes, making little splashes in the dirty water of his pail.

"That one was marked for favor, but he forfeited it by disobedience," the majordomo said. "We had to lash him twice, and then we took him down to visit Naa. I do not think that he will give us further trouble."

As they neared the scrubbing man he glanced up quickly, saw who came, and dropped his wash-rag in his pail, then bent his forehead to the floor, clasping his hands across the nape of his neck. Across his naked back a lattice-work of angry, half-healed lash marks showed.

"O miserable descendant of misbegotten pigs," said Carter's guide, "lift up your uncouth countenance that we may look upon it."

In trembling obedience the prostrate man complied, and Carter put his hand across his mouth to stifle back a gasp, but the majordomo was too intent upon the kneeling wretch to notice his amazement.

"Pick up thy pail, thou thing of filth," the majordomo ordered, and as the trembling slave obeyed: "Lift it to thy lips and drink, drink every drop it holds, or——"

Something like relief showed in the scullion's face as he raised the pail of foul water to his mouth. "Harkening and obedience, *yah Sidi;* Allah bless thee for thy clemency!" he replied through trembling lips, and began to gulp the contents of his scrub-pail as though it had been nectar.

"Thus am I obeyed by all save one in this place," Carter's guide informed him as they turned away.

PROFESSOR MERRILL sat upon his couch, elbows on knees, hands clasped before him, staring moodily at the floor between his slippered feet. "Hullo, Carter," he greeted without raising his eyes as his fellow prisoner joined him. "Where've you been?"

"Man," answered Carter, dropping down upon his couch, "I've been in heaven, or in the best little imitation of the Prophet's Paradise to come you're likely to find this side of Jordan. Listen." Briefly, he recited his adventures; then:

"Wonder what that poor kid meant when she said she had to act that way or suffer death by spikes or the snake? Where were you while this was going on, Prof.?"

"In hell," the other answered. "You saw the bestial system of rewards they have; I saw their beastly punishments. You asked about the spiked death, and the snake? Here's what she meant——"

"Well, I'll be a chimpanzee's first cousin, darned if I won't!" ejaculated Carter as Merrill ended his recital. "So that's the kind of guys these guys are, eh? So long, Prof., I'll be seeing you."

"Where are you going?"

"Snooping. Just snooping, Professor. Everything seems quiet on the Western Front right now."

He was gone an hour, and his boyish grin seemed even wider than usual when he returned. "Found out lots of things, Professor," he announced. "Practically everything except what I wanted to know. I don't suppose it's any news to you that we're in a kind of cellar, but maybe you'll be interested to know we're under water for the most part. Yes, sir, this entire place is hollowed out of the mud under the salt marshes; we can't be more than half a mile from the road. There are about forty people here, all told. You and I and the girl and another feller are the only folks from this neck of the woods. The rest are Simon-pure Syrians, imported to this country by the boss clown of this crazy circus. Maybe the immigration officers wouldn't like to hear about that, eh?"

"The girl I saw kill herself was kidnapped, too," Merrill added, "and we don't know how many others have died here. Who's the other man?"

"Max Mendelbaum."

"What, the broker who disappeared two months ago?"

"Righto. I ran on him by accident; caught him mopping floors. He's worth a hundred thousand to us, too."

"To us?"

"Oh, excuse me, I forgot you didn't know. That line I gave the first assistant boss out in the red room about my being an unemployed accountant was purest hooey undefiled. I'm an investigator for the Grand Central Life Assurance Company. Mendelbaum and Steinmann, his partner, had policies of a hundred thousand dollars on each other's lives. At eight o'clock in the evening of May 31 Max Mendelbaum left Patchogue in his car, headed for New York. It was a foggy

night along the South Shore Road, and next morning State troopers found Mendelbaum's car wrecked beside a big tree growing at the roadside, and the body of his colored chauffeur lying not far away. The colored man was murdered, killed by a knife wound, but of Mendelbaum there was no trace, nor could any clue to him be found. No letters demanding ransom money have been received by his family, so Steinmann's on our necks to pay him the face value of the policy. I'd been scouting round near where Mendelbaum's car was found when I met you, and—boy, there's a connection there, sure as a gun's made of iron!"

"What?" asked Merrill listlessly.

"That tree, man. It's the only piece of vegetation higher than your head for miles around; Mendelbaum's car was wrecked near it, we saw that phantom car bearing down on us almost in its shadow just before they hung the bag on us; that little girl—you know, the one they call Zil-i-Gulab—told us she had the same experience. Yes, sir, the answer's bound up somewhere in that tree or I'm an organ-grinder's monkey."

"What difference does it make?" Merrill rejoined. "Your man Mendelbaum may be worth a hundred thousand to your company outside, but he's about as useful to you here as a bag of gold would be to a starving shipwrecked sailor on a desert island."

"Oh yeah?" Carter answered with a grin. "You just keep an eye on Uncle Thomas. I'm going to salaam these guys up one side and down the other, string along with 'em like nobody's business, and keep both eyes wide open. Sooner or later I'll find the exit to this dump, and when I do we'll all go bye-bye!"

"Humph!" grunted Merrill as he lay down on his couch and composed himself for sleep.

How long they slept neither of them knew, for their watches had been taken from them with their clothes, and in all the subterranean palace there seemed to be no sort of timepiece.

Carter wakened first, feeling himself prodded in the back by something hard. Rolling over with a yawn he beheld the hunchbacked dwarf standing over him, whip in hand, an evil smile upon his ugly features.

"Rise, O man," the hunchback ordered harshly. "The hour has come for you to lick the dust before the Presence."

"Yeah?" responded Carter. "Be careful how you use that whip when I'm around, feller, or you'll be eating whole mouthfuls of dust, an' not tasting 'em. Do I get breakfast?"

The hunchback pointed to the taboret on which there stood a bowl of fruit, then indicated a heap of clothes which lay beside the couch. "Make haste and dress," he ordered. "I wait without."

"Suits me," responded Carter; "I'd a dam' sight rather see your back than your face, any time.

"Hey, Prof.," he shook Professor Merrill by the shoulder, "get up. We're going to a party, and our little playmate's brought us some new pretties."

The costumes which the drawf had brought consisted of short white linen smocks, embroidered on the breast with the emblem of the scarlet dagger, longer coats of violet silk with loosely flowing sleeves, turbans of red silk and soft red leather slippers. A waist shawl of yellow silk completed the ensemble. Arrayed in their new finery they ate a little fruit, drank a goblet of water and joined their ill-favored guide.

Down several winding corridors they passed, glimpsing the garden where Carter had awakened the evening previous, coming at last to halt before a curtained

archway guarded by two men in chain-mail, drawn swords in their hands. These eyed them stonily, but offered neither salute nor hindrance as they passed through the portal in the wake of their misshapen conductor.

"Excellence," announced the hunchback, "here are the two new ones, ready to be received by the Presence." He groveled like an ingratiating dog before the majordomo.

The latter was gorgeously appareled. A suit of glittering chain-mail clothed him from throat to ankles, and upon his head he wore a conical steel cap fitted with a nose guard. Belted to his waist was a jeweled simitar, while a cloak of violet tissue hung from his shoulders nearly to his heels. Slippers of blue leather worked with silver were upon his feet.

Kneeling before him on the marble floor were Zil-i-Gulab and the three girls who had been her companions in the garden, one carrying her zither, one wearing tiny silver cymbals on her finger tips, the third bearing a little golden pipe.

The majordomo clapped his hands and the three musicians rose, advanced a pace and made him a low reverence, whereupon to the tinkling accompaniment of finger-cymbals, pipe and zither took up a low, wailing tune, the players keeping time by stamping their feet and turning rhythmically as they advanced toward a curtained doorway at the long hall's farther end. Zil-i-Gulab poised upon her henna-painted toes, raised her arms above her head, turning her hands inward, fingers tip to tip, and began to spin, whirling faster and faster, till the hawk bills on her wrists and ankles rang so rapidly that their music seemed a high, continuous whir. Thus preceded, the majordomo motioned Merrill and Carter to follow, and the strange procession made its way along the corridor.

Guards drew aside the silken draperies of the door, that the dancing women might proceed unhindered, and the three men entered in their wake.

The room was walled with gold, vaulted at the roof with gleaming silver, floored with stone of bloody red. Scores of lamps burned brightly, striking back dazzling reflections from the burnished metal walls and ceiling. A line of guards was drawn up across the farther wall, their shining naked swords catching bright reflections from the lamps and walls and glistening ceiling. Along the room's sides was ranged a miscellany of the palace servants, women veiled and unveiled, clothed, partly clothed, and wholly nude, black slaves in turban and breech-clout, white slaves similarly attired; among them Carter noted Mendelbaum.

Surrounded by the line of guards, a dais of polished wood was raised, its entire top covered by a scarlet pillow fully a foot thick and obviously filled with some soft wadding, for the man upon it had sunk down until he seemed almost enveloped in its billowing folds. He was a little man, scarcely larger than a child, but the head which topped his narrow shoulders was enormous, and its size was magnified by the huge red turban which he wore. All red—the monstrous pillow, the robe worn by him who sat upon it, the turban bound about his head, the jewels which glistened on his claw-like hands. But his face was pasty-pale, and from it looked a pair of hot, dry, glittering eyes, unchanging in expression, unwinking in their fixed, set stare as those of some great snake.

Despite themselves the visitors trembled. They were men, this was a man, but between them the contrast was like that of life to death, or sanity to madness.

"Lord love a duck!" Tom Carter whispered. "If it ain't——"

"Men of earth, ye stand before the Lord of Life and Death. Draw nigh and give your homage!" the majordomo cried, dropping to his knees and bending till his forehead nearly touched the floor.

ZIL-I-GULAB ceased her whirling dance, ran forward and flung herself face-downward on the floor, arms stretched to fullest length before her, palms up, feet crossed, the instep of the right resting in the hollow of the sole of the left. The musicians prostrated themselves, too, but instead of lying rigid as Zil-i-Gulab did, they writhed upon the scarlet stones, weaving a sort of pattern with their naked bodies, the quick ripple of their pallid flesh like the motion of water stirred by wind. A thrill of revulsion ran through Carter and Merrill simultaneously as they saw the four women had thrust forth their tongues and were licking at the pavement while they lay prostrate.

"Down, slaves, and lick the dust!" cried the majordomo, rising from his knees and glaring at Merrill and Carter.

"Oh, please, please don't anger him!" Zil-i-Gulab raised her forehead from the floor and looked across her shoulder, terror in her violet eyes as she besought obedience to the order.

The form upon the cushion stirred—it was like the stirring of a serpent when something angers it—and a low hiss issued from it.

"Who dares to speak unbidden in the Presence of the Master?" cried the majordomo, and from the huddled heap upon the cushion came two words:

"The lash!"

"Forgive—be merciful—have pity, Awful Master!" Zil-i-Gulab cowered till it seemed she sought to force her body through the scarlet paving-stones, balling her hands into little fists and beating them, her crossed feet and her forehead against the floor in a very ecstasy of terror and supplication.

"Silence, thing!" the majordomo shouted, and the hunchback dwarf sidled forward with a gliding walk, his cruel iron-tipped whip coiled about his wrist, a grin of savage expectation on his hideous countenance.

He drew the lash back quickly, whirled it twice about his head so that it whistled with a vicious hissing scream, then dropped back on one foot, poised the whip for a down-stroke which should cut the tender, wincing back to ribbons, and —fell sprawling to the floor, blood spurting from his mashed lips as Tom Carter drove a fist into his leering, twisted mouth.

Berserk, Carter faced the startled guards and slaves. "Any of you other birds want a taste of this?" he shook his clenched fist aloft. "There's plenty more where that came from!

"As for you, you damned, murdering lunatic——" he made a spring toward the form huddled on the scarlet cushion, but a dozen guardsmen fell upon him and bore him cursing to the floor.

"Shall I strike, my lord?" asked the majordomo, unsheathing his simitar and standing over Carter.

"No," came the whispered answer. "Put him in restraint until the second hour of the watch; then let him go to dine with Naa."

A stillness filled the room, a breathless silence such as men maintain when they look full-featured in the bare-boned face of death. Naa, the great snake, the mighty breaker of bones, the monster who could crush a man as easily as a man could crush an egg—and who was active now with appetite, having fasted thirty days!

Only the faint, whimpering sobs of the nude girl groveling prostrate on the floor

and the heavy breathing of the guards, still panting from their fight with Carter, sounded as the armed men closed about their prisoner and half led, half dragged him from the room.

ARMS bound behind him at the elbows, naked as the instant he first looked upon the world, Tom Carter stood between his guards at the torture chamber entrance.

"Open!" cried the palace majordomo, striking on the panels with the pommel of his sword. "One comes to dine with Naa!"

"Do we accompany thee, *yah Sidi?*" asked a guardsman, grinning in anticipation of the show.

"No, it is not meet that any but me, who am the Master's other self, and the torturers, who never leave their posts, should see this spectacle of death," the majordomo answered. "Stand ye here and wait my coming forth." To Carter:

"Go forward, creature of calamity; a soft embrace awaits thee."

A shuffling step was heard within the torture dungeon, bolts squealed, a bar fell clanking, and the heavy, iron-bound door creaked open a few inches.

"Lights, fool, knowest thou not I bring a guest for Lord Naa's table?" cried the majordomo as they stood in utter darkness while the dungeon door creaked shut and heavy bolts were drawn across it.

The click of flint on steel, the brightening glow of tinder blown upon, finally the feeble gleam of candlelight showed through the gloom as the torture-master raised his lantern, flashing it on Carter's white, drawn face and straining shoulder muscles. Then the lamp was lowered, clearing a little path of light across the dungeon floor, a path which marked Tom Carter's *Via Dolorosa.*

A hand fell on his arm to guide him, and he started at the contact. It was no calloused palm, worn horny by the rack and torture-irons, but a soft, slim hand, a hand whose questing fingers fluttered searchingly along his forearm, feeling for the rawhide thongs that bound his elbows. He felt the first cord give, the second and the third fall off as steel sheared through them, then suddenly realized that his arms were free and that a knife-haft had been slipped into his hand.

No order was required. Swiftly as a striking snake he turned, drove the knife blade handle-deep into the majordomo's throat, then, as a spate of blood gushed on his fingers, gave the steel a wrenching twist.

The fellow staggered backward with a strangling cry. *"Abee,"* one guardsman murmured to the other as he drew his ear back from the door, "my lord Naa wasted little time to make his kill today, it seems."

Light fingers flickered upward through the dark, feeling Carter's cheeks. "Are you all right?" a girl's voice whispered tremulously. "They haven't hurt you?"

"Zil-i-Gulab!" Carter cried out. "How did——"

"S-s-sh!" she laid a warning finger on his lips. "Speak softly, dear; we've only a few minutes."

"But, Zil——"

"Don't call me that, my dear. For the little while I have of life, I'll be Dale Carswell once again."

He took her cheeks between his palms. "How did you manage it, and *why* did you take this awful risk, honey?" he asked softly. "You might have stayed up there, and——"

"What is your name?" she interrupted in a whisper.

"Tom Carter."

"Then listen, Tommy darling. This is no time to heed convention. I love you;

I've loved you from the moment I first saw you, and when you knocked that eunuch down when he was about to flog me, I knew you'd sealed your fate—and mine. 'Whither thou goest I will go, where thou diest I will die,' Tom dear.

"I stole drugged wine and brought it to the torturers. They seldom are admitted to the garden, and they'd sell their souls for a cup of wine mixed with gunjah. They're lying here unconscious now. Then I took the gunjah that they used to drug the wine and smeared the feathers of four pigeons with it. I put them in Naa's den, and he swallowed them. Now he's so stupefied that he can hardly move."

"Dale dear," said Tom, and his voice was well-nigh silenced by the pounding of his heart, "say you'll marry me when we get out of here."

The girl laughed softly, mirthlessly. "There is neither marrying nor giving in marriage where we're going when we get out of here, Tom darling," she replied. "We've only a few moments—an hour, at most—left to live. Even if we kill or bind the torturers and even if the guards can't batter down the door, they can blow their sleeping-gas in through the grille, and cut the door away while we're unconscious. We must be dead before they get us, Tommy dear." She stifled a low sigh. "It would be sweet to marry you," she added in a tear-choked voice, "but the only sacrament which we can share is death."

Tom put his arms about her satin shoulders and held her close against him, comforting her as one would soothe a weeping child. "Listen, honey-lamb," he whispered, "we're not done for yet. I've got a hunch. Last night I went over this dump with a fine-toothed comb—all but this part. Are you with me?"

She rubbed a tear-stained cheek against his shoulder, then raised her face and looked at him. "What——" she began, but:

"Don't ask questions, honey-bud; bring the light and follow on," he ordered, holding her away and grinning down at her.

Together, hand in hand, they walked across the dungeon, paused before a low, barred door and fumbled at its fastenings. "Angel-pie, we're getting warm," he whispered jubilantly. "Feel that draft? See that candle flicker. I haven't felt a breath of breeze before since I came into this hell-hole!"

The door gave way beneath their pressure and before them rose a flight of spiral stairs, leading upward through a well no wider than a manhole.

Up, up they climbed, at last they reached an iron hatchway fastened with a massive lock. "No dice!" Tom muttered disappointedly after fumbling with the lock a moment. "Never mind, we're not licked yet; wait here; be with you in a jiffy."

Half falling in his haste, he dashed down the stairs, seized a heavy iron bar and rushed back to the waiting girl. "Stand clear," he ordered, "there's a cataclysm coming." Inserting the bar in the hasp which held the latch he wrenched and wrenched again, throwing his whole weight against it. The rusty iron screamed like a tortured living thing, then, with a snap like the discharge of a pistol, gave way suddenly, letting him fall sitting on the topmost step. "Damn!" he exclaimed involuntarily, as he rose and rubbed his bruised posterior, then forgot his pain as he forced his shoulder against the hatch and heaved with all his might. The trap-door opened, and a flood of gray, fog-filtered light fell on them.

On every side, stretching to infinity, it seemed, the grass-grown salt marsh lay,

while the lapping of the ocean sounded in their ears.

"Who says we won't stand up before the devil-dodger and tell him that we do?" he asked. "Tum—tum—te-*tum!*" he hummed the opening bars of the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin, then bent and kissed the girl upon the lips.

"Oh, my dear, my precious dear; it's too wonderful to be true!" she wept. "We were lost and are found; we were dead—worse than dead—damned!—and are alive again. Come, let's go quickly, dearest love!"

"O. K.," he answered cheerfully; then: "Hey, hold on, baby, there's a guy back there I got to get—and we're no nudists; we gotta have some clothes!"

For the first time, seemingly, she realized her nakedness, and the bright blood stained her cheeks, but: "Send the police back for him," she urged; "if we wait——"

"And run the risk of that homicidal maniac bumping him off in the meantime? Not much! Come on, I've got a pip of an idea—if it works.

"You're sure you fed that snake a nice, big tummy-full of hashish?" he asked as they regained the torture chamber.

"Yes, he was perfectly quiet when I last looked in his den."

"All right, here's hoping he stays that way a little while. Help me truss these bozos up, will you, honey?"

They stripped the clothing from the torturers, bound them fast and gagged them; then, as Carter clothed himself in the red garments which the torture-master wore: "I'd better put the kibosh on those babies at the door," he told her, picking up a burning-iron and grasping it cudgelwise.

The guards came to attention as the door rasped open, raised their right hands in salute, and went down like a pair of pole-axed oxen as Carter swung his crowbar.

"All clear," he whispered as he dragged his victims in; "now for that sublimated fishing-worm of yours."

The giant reptile lay half coiled, its ugly, wedge-shaped head resting on a fold of its great body, only the rhythmic swelling and deflation of its barrel-like sides as it breathed showing it still lived. "In you go, old scout," Tom Carter told it, thrusting, tugging and hauling till he finished bundling the serpent in the folds of the red cloak which had adorned the torture-master's shoulders.

Two hundred and fifty pounds of snake is no light burden, even when it lies quiescent; when it wakes in outraged dignity and begins to writhe and force its mighty coils apart, to carry it is almost more than mortal man can do; yet Carter did it.

Hunched over like a peddler burdened with his pack, he bore the squirming reptile up the stairs, traversed corridor on corridor, finally reached the throne room where the master waited for the major-domo to bring word Naa had eaten.

Guards at the door were startled as they saw the torture-master stagger forward with his burden and beheld the dancing-girl who followed meekly in his wake, but none approached the Master save by his command—who were they to question the dread keeper of the dungeons? They raised their sabers in salute and held the curtains back.

"Ha, what is this? Why come you here, O monstrous vileness?" cried the man in red upon the scarlet dais as Carter staggered through the door. "Did Naaman send thee? Has Naa eaten?"

"Not yet, but in a minute, buddy," Carter answered, dumping his bundle unceremoniously on the throne room's scar-

let floor and dragging back the hampering cloak from the great reptile's coils.

"Go to it, baby, dinner's on the table!" he invited, leaping back beyond the flailing of the python's tail.

Pandemonium followed chaos. Screams, curses, cries went ringing through the vaulted hall. A guard rushed at the python, simitar upraised. Like a battering-ram the horn-hard nose of the great creature struck him down, and, rippling like a hell-tide, it slithered over the red-varnished floor—straight toward the red-robed man upon the scarlet throne.

There was a hiss like steam escaping from a safety-valve. A scream of mortal terror, ending in a strangled cry. . . .

"H'm, he could dish it out, but he can't take it," Carter muttered; then: "Come on, Professor Merrill, scram! You, too, buddy, I need you in my business!" He seized Merrill by the arm with one hand, Max Mendelbaum with the other, and they dashed from that room where wild confusion reigned.

Hurrying guardsmen passed them on the run; none sought to stop or question them; everyone was rushing somewhere, and their haste occasioned no suspicion.

"Grab up some clothes for Mendelbaum," Carter ordered as they reached the torture chamber and barred the door.

Dale Carswell donned a torturer's red robe and skull-cap, Mendelbaum did likewise, and together they went climbing up the stairway of escape in frantic haste.

The tide was rising. Even as they reached the hatchway it was lapping round the coping, but they paid no heed. Splashing, falling, cutting themselves on the tough grass, they made their way shoreward, toward the ribbon of the South Road's pavement.

"Good Lord!" cried Carter as they halted for an instant to draw breath. "I forgot the hatch!"

Turning, he raced frantically back, fell, regained his footing and ran on.

In half an hour he rejoined them. "Too late," he announced briefly. "There's six feet of ocean over it by now. They were like rats in a trap."

Mendelbaum and Merrill looked conventionally grave.

Dale Carswell answered with a woman's ruthless logic. "I don't care. They deserved it—every one of them. That awful man they called the Master was like some dreadful spider, catching helpless, inoffensive people in his web, then torturing and killing them. The others were no better. It was an awful death they died, but if you only knew——"

"Baby, we know plenty," interrupted Carter as he took her hand to help her to the roadway.

"THERE'S the tree where we met our Waterloo," he pointed to the big oak pollard standing by the highway. "I'm going to give it the once-over. I've got a hunch."

Up the bole he clambered, crept out on a limb that overhung the roadway, and began to shake it. "Heads up, here comes the phantom!" he announced. Dropping from the tree-branch, like a window-shade unfurled, came a sheet of thin metallic tissue, capable of folding to a compact cylinder, bright enough when hung across the road to reflect the headlights of a motorcar.

"Get it?" he asked as he rejoined them. "We saw our own reflection, thought we were going to have a collision, stopped, or ran off the road; then"—he made a pantomime of drawing a sack over his head—"next thing we knew we were nice, helpless little flies in the Spider-Man's web. They had their scouts posted near the road, of course, saw a likely-looking car approaching, dropped the

mirror-cloth, and—there you are. Dam' clever people, these crazy men."

"Crazy?" echoed Merrill with a smile. "I should say——"

"Don't say it, Prof., you'd only have to take it back," Carter chuckled. " 'The Master' was crazy as a fish out of water. I recognized him the moment I clapped eyes on him. He was Jacques LeGaie. You know, the feller who killed half a dozen people under the delusion he was Bluebeard reincarnated, escaped from Matteawan and tried to set up a kingdom of his own in Indo-China, and darn near got away with it—would have, too, if the French hadn't clapped him in the bughouse. He escaped from there, too, and disappeared. They say he had a couple of million dollars in gold coin cached away somewhere, and from the layout of that underground palace we just got out of, I shouldn't be surprized if he had. He was always fancying himself somebody's reincarnation, you know. His latest delusion must have been—what was his name, Professor?"

"The Sheik Al-Jebal," Merrill answered.

"Righto. Now get this: We don't tell anyone where we've been. If we do, we'll find ourselves inside some nice, comfortable padded cell, with visitors allowed Thursday and Sunday afternoons.

"Mendelbaum, you've had amnesia. You don't know where you've been or what you've been doing. If I ever hear of your telling about the Spider-Man and his underground kingdom—how'd you like to have me spill the story of how you drank a pailful of scrub-water, and thanked the guy for ordering you to do it?"

"I wonder what time it is?" Dale Carswell asked.

"Can't say," responded Carter, "but my guess is it's early morning. "We'll be in Brooklyn in time for breakfast at the St. George, if a car comes along—and my thumb holds out."

"You been to masquerade party, huh?" asked the Italian truck farmer who obligingly halted at the sign of Carter's upraised thumb and agreed to take them as far as Jamaica.

"Brother," Tom assured him solemnly, "you'd be surprized!"

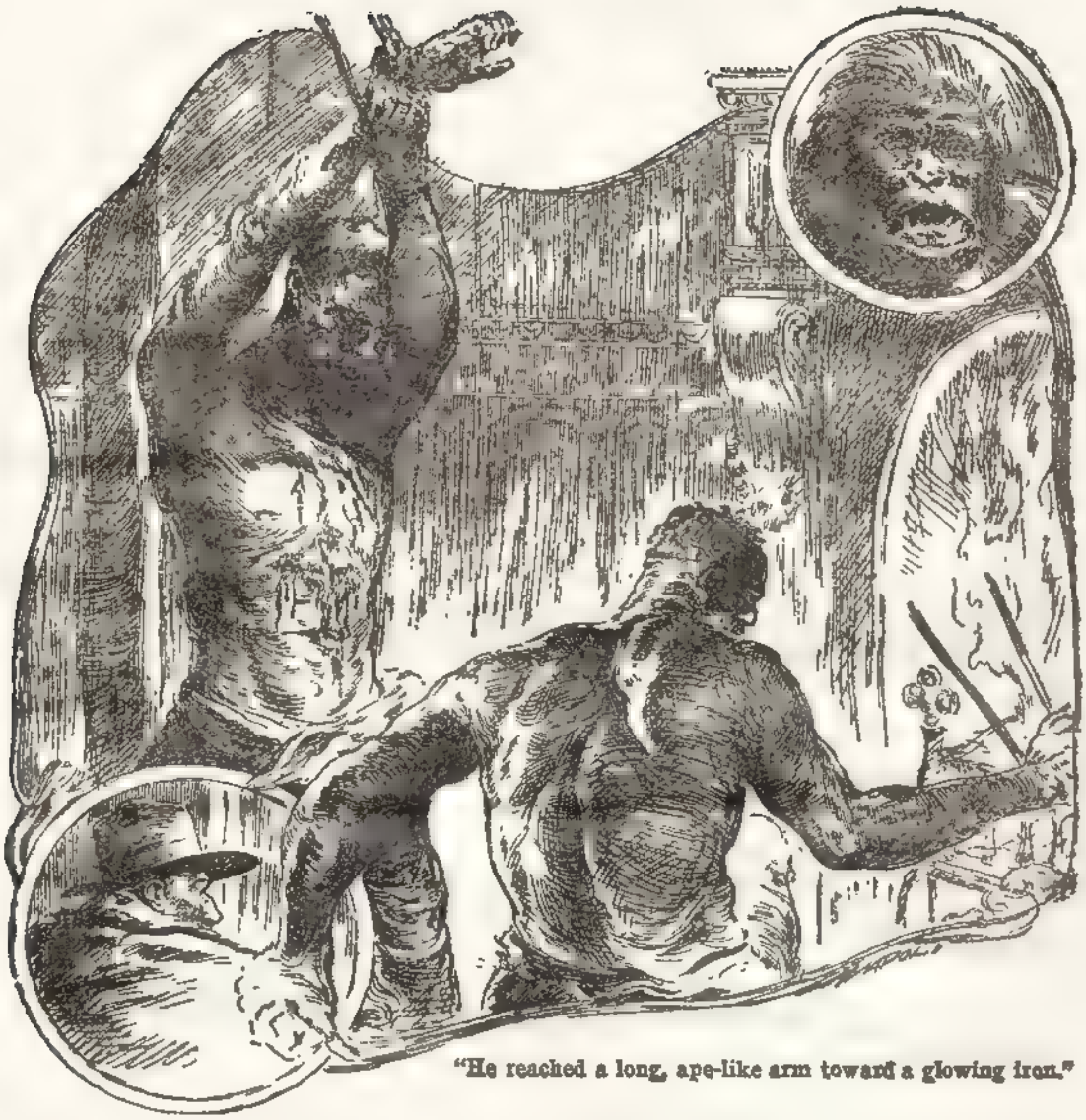
The fog lifted as they neared the city, and behind them came the faint glow of the rising sun.

"Oh, my dear," Dale leaned her head on Carter's shoulder, "after those dreadful days in that hell beneath the ground, you've no idea how good a little sun and air feels."

Carter drew her closer to him. "I've a five-thousand-dollar bonus coming for bringing Mendelbaum back alive," he told her, "and a vacation, too. They'll come in handy for our honeymoon, darlingest. We'll have the other, too."

"The other?" her eyes were bright with adoration as she lifted them questioningly to his.

"Precisely, belovedest, what you just said—a little son and heir."



"He reached a long, ape-like arm toward a glowing iron."

The Grisly Horror

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A gripping, thrilling tale of a ghastly horror that stalked the swamps of the Mississippi—a tale of glorious heroism and the hunger of a black god

1 The Horror in the Pines

THE silence of the pine woods lay like a brooding cloak about the soul of Bristol McGrath. The black shadows seemed fixed, immovable as the weight of superstition that overhung this forgotten back-country. Vague ancestral dreads stirred at the back of McGrath's

mind; for he was born in the pine woods, and sixteen years of roaming about the world had not erased their shadows. The fearsome tales at which he had shuddered as a child whispered again in his consciousness; tales of black shapes stalking the midnight glades. . . .

Cursing these childish memories, McGrath quickened his pace. The dim trail wound tortuously between dense walls of giant trees. No wonder he had been unable to hire anyone in the distant river village to drive him to the Ballville estate. The road was impassable for a vehicle, choked with rotting stumps and new growth. Ahead of him it bent sharply.

McGrath halted short, frozen to immobility. The silence had been broken at last, in such a way as to bring a chill tingling to the backs of his hands. For the sound had been the unmistakable groan of a human being in agony. Only for an instant was McGrath motionless. Then he was gliding about the bend of the trail with the noiseless slouch of a hunting panther.

A blue snub-nosed revolver had appeared as if by magic in his right hand. His left involuntarily clenched in his pocket on the bit of paper that was responsible for his presence in that grim forest. That paper was a frantic and mysterious appeal for aid; it was signed by McGrath's worst enemy, and contained the name of a woman long dead.

McGrath rounded the bend in the trail, every nerve tense and alert, expecting anything—except what he actually saw. His startled eyes hung on the grisly object for an instant, and then swept the forest walls. Nothing stirred there. A dozen feet back from the trail visibility vanished in a ghoulish twilight, where *anything* might lurk unseen. McGrath dropped to his knee beside the figure that lay in the trail before him.

It was a man, spread-eagled, hands and feet bound to four pegs driven deeply in the hard-packed earth; a black-bearded, hook-nosed, swarthy man. "Ahmed!" muttered McGrath. "Ballville's Arab servant! God!"

For it was not the binding cords that brought the glaze to the Arab's eyes. A weaker man than McGrath might have sickened at the mutilations which keen knives had wrought on the man's body. McGrath recognized the work of an expert in the art of torture. Yet a spark of life still throbbed in the tough frame of the Arab. McGrath's gray eyes grew bleaker as he noted the position of the victim's body, and his mind flew back to another, grimmer jungle, and a half-flayed black man pegged out on a path as a warning to the white man who dared invade a forbidden land.

He cut the cords, shifted the dying man to a more comfortable position. It was all he could do. He saw the delirium ebb momentarily in the bloodshot eyes, saw recognition glimmer there. Clots of bloody foam splashed the matted beard. The lips writhed soundlessly, and McGrath glimpsed the bloody stump of a severed tongue.

The black-nailed fingers began scrabbling in the dust. They shook, clawing erratically, but with purpose. McGrath bent close, tense with interest, and saw crooked lines grow under the quivering fingers. With the last effort of an iron will, the Arab was tracing a message in the characters of his own language. McGrath recognized the name: "Richard Ballville"; it was followed by "danger," and the hand waved weakly up the trail; then—and McGrath stiffened convulsively—*"Constance"*. One final effort of the dragging finger traced "John De Al——" Suddenly the bloody frame was convulsed by one last sharp agony; the lean, sinewy

hand knotted spasmodically and then fell limp. Ahmed ibn Suleyman was beyond vengeance or mercy.

McGrath rose, dusting his hands, aware of the tense stillness of the grim woods around him; aware of a faint rustling in their depths that was not caused by any breeze. He looked down at the mangled figure with involuntary pity, though he knew well the foulness of the Arab's heart, a black evil that had matched that of Ahmed's master, Richard Ballville. Well, it seemed that master and man had at last met their match in human fiendishness. But who, or *what?* For a hundred years the Ballvilles had ruled supreme over this back-country, first over their wide plantations and hundreds of slaves, and later over the submissive descendants of those slaves. Richard, the last of the Ballvilles, had exercised as much authority over the pinelands as any of his autocratic ancestors. Yet from this country where men had bowed to the Ballvilles for a century, had come that frenzied cry of fear, a telegram that McGrath clenched in his coat pocket.

STILLNESS succeeded the rustling, more sinister than any sound. McGrath knew he was watched; knew that the spot where Ahmed's body lay was the invisible deadline that had been drawn for him. He believed that he would be allowed to turn and retrace his steps unmolested to the distant village. He knew that if he continued on his way, death would strike him suddenly and unseen. Turning, he strode back the way he had come.

He made the turn and kept straight on until he had passed another crook in the trail. Then he halted, listened. All was silent. Quickly he drew the paper from his pocket, smoothed out the wrinkles and read, again, in the cramped scrawl of the man he hated most on earth:

Bristol:

If you still love Constance Brand, for God's sake forget your hate and come to Ballville Manor as quickly as the devil can drive you.

RICHARD BALLVILLE.

That was all. It reached him by telegraph in that Far Western city where McGrath had resided since his return from Africa. He would have ignored it, but for the mention of Constance Brand. That name had sent a choking, agonizing pulse of amazement through his soul, had sent him racing toward the land of his birth by train and plane, as if, indeed, the devil were on his heels. It was the name of one he thought dead for three years; the name of the only woman Bristol McGrath had ever loved.

Replacing the telegram, he left the trail and headed westward, pushing his powerful frame between the thick-set trees. His feet made little sound on the matted pine needles. His progress was all but noiseless. Not for nothing had he spent his boyhood in the country of the big pines.

Three hundred yards from the old road he came upon that which he sought—an ancient trail paralleling the road. Choked with young growth, it was little more than a trace through the thick pines. He knew that it ran to the back of the Ballville mansion; did not believe the secret watchers would be guarding it. For how could they know he remembered it?

He hurried south along it, his ears whetted for any sound. Sight alone could not be trusted in that forest. The mansion, he knew, was not far away, now. He was passing through what had once been fields, in the days of Richard's grandfather, running almost up to the spacious lawns that girdled the Manor. But for half a century they had been abandoned to the advance of the forest.

But now he glimpsed the Manor, a hint of solid bulk among the pine tops ahead of him. And almost simultaneously his heart shot into his throat as a scream of human anguish knifed the stillness. He could not tell whether it was a man or a woman who screamed, and his thought that it might be a woman winged his feet in his reckless dash toward the building that loomed starkly up just beyond the straggling fringe of trees.

The young pines had even invaded the once generous lawns. The whole place wore an aspect of decay. Behind the Manor, the barns, and outhouses which once housed slave families, were crumbling in ruin. The mansion itself seemed to totter above the litter, a creaky giant, rat-gnawed and rotting, ready to collapse at any untoward event. With the stealthy tread of a tiger Bristol McGrath approached a window on the side of the house. From that window sounds were issuing that were an affront to the tree-filtered sunlight and a crawling horror to the brain.

Nerving himself for what he might see, he peered within.

2. *Black Torture*

He was looking into a great dusty chamber which might have served as a ballroom in ante-bellum days; its lofty ceiling was hung with cobwebs, its rich oak panels showed dark and stained. But there was a fire in the great fireplace —a small fire, just large enough to heat to a white glow the slender steel rods thrust into it.

But it was only later that Bristol McGrath saw the fire and the things that glowed on the hearth. His eyes were gripped like a spell on the master of the Manor; and once again he looked on a dying man.

A heavy beam had been nailed to the paneled wall, and from it jutted a rude cross-piece. From this cross-piece Richard Ballville hung by cords about his wrists. His toes barely touched the floor, tantalizingly, inviting him to stretch his frame continually in an effort to relieve the agonizing strain on his arms. The cords had cut deeply into his wrists; blood trickled down his arms; his hands were black and swollen almost to bursting. He was naked except for his trousers, and McGrath saw that already the white-hot irons had been horribly employed. There was reason enough for the deathly pallor of the man, the cold beads of agony upon his skin. Only his fierce vitality had allowed him thus long to survive the ghastly burns on his limbs and body.

On his breast had been burned a curious symbol—a cold hand laid itself on McGrath's spine. For he recognized that symbol, and once again his memory raced away across the world and the years to a black, grim, hideous jungle where drums bellowed in fire-shot darkness and naked priests of an abhorred cult traced a frightful symbol in quivering human flesh.

Between the fireplace and the dying man squatted a thick-set black man, clad only in ragged, muddy trousers. His back was toward the window, presenting an impressive pair of shoulders. His bullet-head was set squarely between those gigantic shoulders, like that of a frog, and he appeared to be avidly watching the face of the man on the cross-piece.

Richard Ballville's bloodshot eyes were like those of a tortured animal, but they were fully sane and conscious; they blazed with desperate vitality. He lifted his head painfully and his gaze swept the room. Outside the window McGrath instinctively shrank back. He did not know whether Ballville saw him or not. The man showed no sign to betray the presence of the watcher to the bestial black who

scrutinized him. Then the brute turned his head toward the fire, reaching a long ape-like arm toward a glowing iron—and Ballville's eyes blazed with a fierce and urgent meaning the watcher could not mistake. McGrath did not need the agonized motion of the tortured head that accompanied the look. With a tigerish bound he was over the window-sill and in the room, even as the startled black shot erect, whirling with apish agility.

McGrath had not drawn his gun. He dared not risk a shot that might bring other foes upon him. There was a butcher-knife in the belt that held up the ragged, muddy trousers. It seemed to leap like a living thing into the hand of the black as he turned. But in McGrath's hand gleamed a curved Afghan dagger that had served him well in many a bygone battle.

Knowing the advantage of instant and relentless attack, he did not pause. His feet scarcely touched the floor inside before they were hurling him at the astounded black man.

An inarticulate cry burst from the thick red lips. The eyes rolled wildly, the butcher-knife went back and hissed forward with the swiftness of a striking cobra that would have disemboweled a man whose thews were less steely than those of Bristol McGrath.

But the black was involuntarily stumbling backward as he struck, and that instinctive action slowed his stroke just enough for McGrath to avoid it with a lightning-like twist of his torso. The long blade hissed under his arm-pit, slicing cloth and skin—and simultaneously the Afghan dagger ripped through the black, bull throat.

THERE was no cry, but only a choking gurgle as the man fell, spouting blood. McGrath had sprung free as a wolf springs after delivering the death-stroke. Without emotion he surveyed his handiwork. The black man was already dead, his head half severed from his body. That slicing sidewise lunge that slew in silence, severing the throat to the spinal column, was a favorite stroke of the hairy hillmen that haunt the crags overhanging the Khyber Pass. Less than a dozen white men have ever mastered it. Bristol McGrath was one.

McGrath turned to Richard Ballville. Foam dripped on the seared, naked breast, and blood trickled from the lips. McGrath feared that Ballville had suffered the same mutilation that had rendered Ahmed speechless; but it was only suffering and shock that numbed Ballville's tongue. McGrath cut his cords and eased him down on a worn old divan near by. Ballville's lean, muscle-corded body quivered like taut steel strings under McGrath's hands. He gagged, finding his voice.

"I knew you'd come!" he gasped, writhing at the contact of the divan against his seared flesh. "I've hated you for years, but I knew——"

McGrath's voice was harsh as the rasp of steel. "What did you mean by your mention of Constance Brand? She is dead."

A ghastly smile twisted the thin lips.

"No, she's not dead! But she soon will be, if you don't hurry. Quick! Brandy! There on the table—that beast didn't drink it all."

McGrath held the bottle to his lips; Ballville drank avidly. McGrath wondered at the man's iron nerve. That he was in ghastly agony was obvious. He should be screaming in a delirium of pain. Yet he held to sanity and spoke lucidly, though his voice was a laboring croak.

"I haven't much time," he choked. "Don't interrupt. Save your curses till later. We both loved Constance Brand. She loved you. Three years ago she dis-

appeared. Her garments were found on the bank of a river. Her body was never recovered. You went to Africa to drown your sorrow; I retired to the estate of my ancestors and became a recluse.

"What you didn't know—what the world didn't know—was that Constance Brand came with me! No, she didn't drown. That ruse was my idea. For three years Constance Brand has lived in this house!" He achieved a ghastly laugh. "Oh, don't look so stunned, Bristol. She didn't come of her own free will. She loved you too much. I kidnapped her, brought her here by force—Bristol!" His voice rose to a frantic shriek. "If you kill me you'll never learn where she is!"

The frenzied hands that had locked on his corded throat relaxed and sanity returned to the red eyes of Bristol McGrath.

"Go on," he whispered in a voice not even he recognized.

"I couldn't help it," gasped the dying man. "She was the only woman I ever loved—oh, don't sneer, Bristol. The others didn't count. I brought her here where I was king. She couldn't escape, couldn't get word to the outside world. No one lives in this section except nigger descendants of the slaves owned by my family. My word is—*was*—their only law.

"I swear I didn't harm her. I only kept her prisoner, trying to force her to marry me. I didn't want her any other way. I was mad, but I couldn't help it. I come of a race of autocrats who took what they wanted, recognized no law but their own desires. You know that. You understand it. You come of the same breed yourself.

"Constance hates me, if that's any consolation to you, damn you. She's strong, too. I thought I could break her spirit. But I couldn't, not without the whip, and I couldn't bear to use that." He grinned hideously at the wild growl that rose unbidden to McGrath's lips. The big man's eyes were coals of fire; his hard hands knotted into iron mallets.

A spasm racked Ballville, and blood started from his lips. His grin faded and he hurried on.

"All went well until the foul fiend inspired me to send for John De Albor. I met him in Vienna, years ago. He's from East Africa—a devil in human form! He saw Constance—lusted for her as only a man of his type can. When I finally realized that, I tried to kill him. Then I found that he was stronger than I; that he'd made himself master of the niggers—*my* niggers, to whom my word had always been law. He'd taught them his devilish cult——"

"Voodoo," muttered McGrath involuntarily.

"No! Voodoo is infantile beside this black fiendishness. Look at the symbol on my breast, where De Albor burned it with a white-hot iron. You have been in Africa. You understand the brand of Zambebwei.

"De Albor turned my negroes against me. I tried to escape with Constance and Ahmed. My own blacks hemmed me in. I did smuggle a telegram through to the village by a man who remained faithful to me—they suspected him and tortured him until he admitted it. John De Albor brought me his head.

"Before the final break I hid Constance in a place where no one will ever find her, except you. De Albor tortured Ahmed until he told that I had sent for a friend of the girl's to aid us. Then De Albor sent his men up the road with what was left of Ahmed, as a warning to you if you came. It was this morning that they seized us; I hid Constance last night. Not even Ahmed knew where. De Albor tortured me to make me tell——" the dying man's hands clenched and a fierce passionate light blazed in his eyes. McGrath knew that not all the torments of

all the hells could ever have wrung that secret from Ballville's iron lips.

"It was the least you could do," he said, his voice harsh with conflicting emotions. "I've lived in hell for three years because of you—and Constance has. You deserve to die. If you weren't dying already I'd kill you myself."

"Damn you, do you think I want your forgiveness?" gasped the dying man. "I'm glad you suffered. If Constance didn't need your help, I'd like to see you dying as I'm dying—and I'll be waiting for you in hell. But enough of this. De Albor left me awhile to go up the road and assure himself that Ahmed was dead. This beast got to swilling my brandy and decided to torture me some himself.

"Now listen—Constance is hidden in Lost Cave. No man on earth knows of its existence except you and me—not even the negroes. Long ago I put an iron door in the entrance, and I killed the man who did the work; so the secret is safe. There's no key. You've got to open it by working certain knobs."

It was more and more difficult for the man to enunciate intelligibly. Sweat dripped from his face, and the cords of his arms quivered.

"Run your fingers over the edge of the door until you find three knobs that form a triangle. You can't see them; you'll have to feel. Press each one in counterclockwise motion, three times, around and around. Then pull on the bar. The door will open. Take Constance and fight your way out. If you see they're going to get you, shoot her! Don't let her fall into the hands of that black beast——"

The voice rose to a shriek, foam spattered from the livid writhing lips, and Richard Ballville heaved himself almost upright, then toppled limply back. The iron will that had animated the broken body had snapped at last, as a taut wire snaps.

McGrath looked down at the still form, his brain a maelstrom of seething emotions, then wheeled, glaring, every nerve atingle, his pistol springing into his hand.

3. *The Black Priest*

A MAN stood in the doorway that opened upon the great outer hall—a tall man in a strange alien garb. He wore a turban and a silk coat belted with a gay-hued girdle. Turkish slippers were on his feet. His skin was not much darker than McGrath's, his features distinctly oriental in spite of the heavy glasses he wore.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded McGrath, covering him.

"Ali ibn Suleyman, *effendi*," answered the other in faultless Arabic. "I came to this place of devils at the urging of my brother, Ahmed ibn Suleyman, whose soul may the Prophet ease. In New Orleans the letter came to me. I hastened here. And lo, stealing through the woods, I saw black men dragging my brother's corpse to the river. I came on, seeking his master."

McGrath mutely indicated the dead man. The Arab bowed his head in stately reverence.

"My brother loved him," he said. "I would have vengeance for my brother and my brother's master. *Effendi*, let me go with you."

"All right." McGrath was afire with impatience. He knew the fanatical clan-loyalty of the Arabs, knew that Ahmed's one decent trait had been a fierce devotion for the scoundrel he served. "Follow me."

With a last glance at the master of the Manor and the black body sprawling like a human sacrifice before him, McGrath left the chamber of torture. Just so, he reflected, one of Ballville's warrior-king ancestors might have lain in some dim past age, with a slaughtered slave at his

feet to serve his spirit in the land of ghosts.

With the Arab at his heels, McGrath emerged into the girdling pines that slumbered in the still heat of noon. Faintly to his ears a distant pulse of sound was borne by a vagrant drift of breeze. It sounded like the throb of a far-away drum.

"Come on!" McGrath strode through the cluster of outhouses and plunged into the woods that rose behind them. Here, too, had once stretched the fields that builded the wealth of the aristocratic Ballvilles; but for many years they had been abandoned. Paths straggled aimlessly through the ragged growth, until presently the growing denseness of the trees told the invaders that they were in forest that had never known the woodsman's ax. McGrath looked for a path. Impressions received in childhood are always enduring. Memory remains, overlaid by later things, but unerring through the years. McGrath found the path he sought, a dim trace, twisting through the trees.

They were forced to walk single file; the branches scraped their clothing, their feet sank into the carpet of pine needles. The land trended gradually lower. Pines gave way to cypresses, choked with underbrush. Scummy-pools of stagnant water glimmered under the trees. Bullfrogs croaked, mosquitoes sang with maddening insistence about them. Again the distant drum throbbed across the pinelands.

McGrath shook the sweat out of his eyes. That drum roused memories well fitted to these somber surroundings. His thoughts reverted to the hideous scar seared on Richard Ballville's naked breast. Ballville had supposed that he, McGrath, knew its meaning; but he did not. That it portended black horror and madness he knew, but its full significance he did not know. Only once before had he seen that symbol, in the horror-haunted country of Zambebwei, into which few white men had ever ventured, and from which only one white man had ever escaped alive. Bristol McGrath was that man, and he had only penetrated the fringe of that abysmal land of jungle and black swamp. He had not been able to plunge deep enough into that forbidden realm either to prove or to disprove the ghastly tales men whispered of an ancient cult surviving a prehistoric age, of the worship of a monstrosity whose mold violated an accepted law of nature. Little enough he had seen; but what he had seen had filled him with shuddering horror that sometimes returned now in crimson nightmares.

No word had passed between the men since they had left the Manor. McGrath plunged on through the vegetation that choked the path. A fat, blunt-tailed moccasin slithered from under his feet and vanished. Water could not be far away; a few more steps revealed it. They stood on the edge of a dank, slimy marsh from which rose a miasma of rotting vegetable matter. Cypresses shadowed it. The path ended at its edge. The swamp stretched away and away, lost to sight swiftly in twilight dimness.

"WHAT now, *effendi?*" asked Ali. "Are we to swim this morass?"

"It's full of bottomless quagmires," answered McGrath. "It would be suicide for a man to plunge into it. Not even the piny woods niggers have ever tried to cross it. But there *is* a way to get to the hill that rises in the middle of it. You can just barely glimpse it, among the branches of the cypresses, see? Years ago, when Ballville and I were boys—and friends—we discovered an old, old Indian path, a secret, submerged road that led to that hill. There's a cave in the hill,

and a woman is imprisoned in that cave. I'm going to it. Do you want to follow me, or to wait for me here? The path is a dangerous one."

"I will go, *effendi,*" answered the Arab.

McGrath nodded in appreciation, and began to scan the trees about him. Presently he found what he was looking for—a faint blaze on a huge cypress, an old mark, almost imperceptible. Confidently then, he stepped into the marsh beside the tree. He himself had made that mark, long ago. Scummy water rose over his shoe soles, but no higher. He stood on a flat rock, or rather on a heap of rocks, the topmost of which was just below the stagnant surface. Locating a certain gnarled cypress far out in the shadow of the marsh, he began walking directly toward it, spacing his strides carefully, each carrying him to a rock-step invisible below the murky water. Ali ibn Suleyman followed him, imitating his motions.

Through the swamp they went, following the marked trees that were their guide-posts. McGrath wondered anew at the motives that had impelled the ancient builders of the trail to bring these huge rocks from afar and sink them like piles into the slush. The work must have been stupendous, requiring no mean engineering skill. Why had the Indians built this broken road to Lost Island? Surely that isle and the cave in it had some religious significance to the red men; or perhaps it was their refuge against some stronger foe.

The going was slow; a misstep meant a plunge into marshy ooze, into unstable mire that might swallow a man alive. The island grew out of the trees ahead of them—a small knoll, girdled by a vegetation-choked beach. Through the foliage was visible the rocky wall that rose sheer from the beach to a height of fifty or sixty feet. It was almost like a granite block rising from a flat sandy rim. The pinnacle was almost bare of growth.

McGrath was pale, his breath coming in quick gasps. As they stepped upon the beach-like strip, Ali, with a glance of commiseration, drew a flask from his pocket.

"Drink a little brandy, *effendi,*" he urged, touching the mouth to his own lips, oriental-fashion. "It will aid you."

McGrath knew that Ali thought his evident agitation was a result of exhaustion. But he was scarcely aware of his recent exertions. It was the emotions that raged within him—the thought of Constance Brand, whose beautiful form had haunted his troubled dreams for three dreary years. He gulped deeply of the liquor, scarcely tasting it, and handed back the flask.

"Come on!"

The pounding of his own heart was suffocating, drowning the distant drum, as he thrust through the choking vegetation at the foot of the cliff. On the gray rock above the green mask appeared a curious carven symbol, as he had seen it years ago, when its discovery led him and Richard Ballville to the hidden cavern. He tore aside the clinging vines and fronds, and his breath sucked in at the sight of a heavy iron door set in the narrow mouth that opened in the granite wall.

McGrath's fingers were trembling as they swept over the metal, and behind him he could hear Ali breathing heavily. Some of the white man's excitement had imparted itself to the Arab. McGrath's hands found the three knobs, forming the apices of a triangle—mere protuberances, not apparent to the sight. Controlling his jumping nerves, he pressed them as Ballville had instructed him, and felt each give slightly at the third pressure. Then, holding his breath, he

grasped the bar that was welded in the middle of the door, and pulled. Smoothly, on oiled hinges, the massive portal swung open.

They looked into a wide tunnel that ended in another door, this a grille of steel bars. The tunnel was not dark; it was clean and roomy, and the ceiling had been pierced to allow light to enter, the holes covered with screens to keep out insects and reptiles. But through the grille he glimpsed something that sent him racing along the tunnel, his heart almost bursting through his ribs. Ali was close at his heels.

THE grille-door was not locked. It swung outward under his fingers. He stood motionless, almost stunned with the impact of his emotions.

His eyes were dazzled by a gleam of gold; a sunbeam slanted down through the pierced rock roof and struck mellow fire from the glorious profusion of golden hair that flowed over the white arm that pillowed the beautiful head on the carved oak table.

"Constance!" It was a cry of hunger and yearning that burst from his livid lips.

Echoing the cry, the girl started up, staring wildly, her hands at her temples, her lambent hair rippling over her shoulders. To his dizzy gaze she seemed to float in an aureole of golden light.

"Bristol! Bristol McGrath!" she echoed his call with a haunting, incredulous cry. Then she was in his arms, her white arms clutching him in a frantic embrace, as if she feared he were but a phantom that might vanish from her.

For the moment the world ceased to exist for Bristol McGrath. He might have been blind, deaf and dumb to the universe at large. His dazed brain was cognizant only of the woman in his arms, his senses drunken with the softness and fragrance of her, his soul stunned with the overwhelming realization of a dream he had thought dead and vanished for ever.

When he could think consecutively again, he shook himself like a man coming out of a trance, and stared stupidly around him. He was in a wide chamber, cut in the solid rock. Like the tunnel, it was illumined from above, and the air was fresh and clean. There were chairs, tables and a hammock, carpets on the rocky floor, cans of food and a water-cooler. Ballville had not failed to provide for his captive's comfort. McGrath glanced around at the Arab, and saw him beyond the grille. Considerately he had not intruded upon their reunion.

"Three years!" the girl was sobbing. "Three years I've waited. I knew you'd come! I knew it! But we must be careful, my darling. Richard will kill you if he finds you—kill us both!"

"He's beyond killing anyone," answered McGrath. "But just the same, we've got to get out of here."

Her eyes flared with new terror.

"Yes! John De Albor! Ballville was afraid of him. That's why he locked me in here. He said he'd sent for you. I was afraid for you——"

"Ali!" McGrath called. "Come in here. We're getting out of here now, and we'd better take some water and food with us. We may have to hide in the swamps for——"

Abruptly Constance shrieked, tore herself from her lover's arms. And McGrath, frozen by the sudden, awful fear in her wide eyes, felt the dull jolting impact of a savage blow at the base of his skull. Consciousness did not leave him, but a strange paralysis gripped him. He dropped like an empty sack on the stone floor and lay there like a dead man, help-

lessly staring up at the scene which tinged his brain with madness—Constance struggling frenziedly in the grasp of the man he had known as Ali ibn Suleyman, now terribly transformed.

The man had thrown off his turban and glasses. And in the murky whites of his eyes, McGrath read the truth with its grisly implications—the man was not an Arab. He was a negroid mixed breed. Yet some of his blood must have been Arab, for there was a slightly Semitic cast to his countenance, and this cast, together with his oriental garb and his perfect acting of his part, had made him seem genuine. But now all this was discarded and the negroid strain was uppermost; even his voice, which had enunciated the sonorous Arabic, was now the throaty gutturals of the negro.

"You've killed him!" the girl sobbed hysterically, striving vainly to break away from the cruel fingers that prisoned her white wrists.

"He's not dead yet," laughed the octoroon. "The fool quaffed drugged brandy—a drug found only in the Zambebwei jungles. It lies inactive in the system until made effective by a sharp blow on a nerve center."

"Please do something for him!" she begged.

The fellow laughed brutally.

"Why should I? He has served his purpose. Let him lie there until the swamp insects have picked his bones. I should like to watch that—but we will be far away before nightfall." His eyes blazed with the bestial gratification of possession. The sight of this white beauty struggling in his grasp seemed to rouse all the jungle lust in the man. McGrath's wrath and agony found expression only in his bloodshot eyes. He could not move hand or foot.

"It was well I returned alone to the Manor," laughed the octoroon. "I stole up to the window while this fool talked with Richard Ballville. The thought came to me to let him lead me to the place where you were hidden. It had never occurred to me that there was a hiding-place in the swamp. I had the Arab's coat, slippers and turban; I had thought I might use them sometime. The glasses helped, too. It was not difficult to make an Arab out of myself. This man had never seen John De Albor. I was born in East Africa and grew up a slave in the house of an Arab—before I ran away and wandered to the land of Zambebwei.

"But enough. We must go. The drum has been muttering all day. The blacks are restless. I promised them a sacrifice to Zemba. I was going to use the Arab, but by the time I had tortured out of him the *information* I desired, he was no longer fit for a sacrifice. Well, let them bang their silly drum. They'd like to have *you* for the Bride of Zemba, but they don't know I've found you. I have a motor-boat hidden on the river five miles from here——"

"You fool!" shrieked Constance, struggling passionately. "Do you think you can carry a white girl down the river, like a slave?"

"I have a drug which will make you like a dead woman," he said. "You will lie in the bottom of the boat, covered by sacks. When I board the steamer that shall bear us from these shores, you will go into my cabin in a large, well-ventilated trunk. You will know nothing of the discomforts of the voyage. You will awake in Africa——"

He was fumbling in his shirt, necessarily releasing her with one hand. With a frenzied scream and a desperate wrench, she tore loose and sped out through the tunnel. John De Albor plunged after her, bellowing. A red haze floated before

McGrath's maddened eyes. The girl would plunge to her death in the swamps, unless she remembered the guide-marks —perhaps it was death she sought, in preference to the fate planned for her by the fiendish negro.

They had vanished from his sight, out of the tunnel; but suddenly Constance screamed again, with a new poignancy. To McGrath's ears came an excited jabbering of negro gutturals. De Albor's accents were lifted in angry protest. Constance was sobbing hysterically. The voices were moving away. McGrath got a vague glimpse of a group of figures through the masking vegetation as they moved across the line of the tunnel mouth. He saw Constance being dragged along by half a dozen giant blacks, typical pineland dwellers, and after them came John De Albor, his hands eloquent in dissension. That glimpse only, through the fronds, and then the tunnel mouth gaped empty and the sound of splashing water faded away through the marsh.

4. *The Black God's Hunger*

In the brooding silence of the cavern Bristol McGrath lay staring blankly upward, his soul a seething hell. Fool, fool, to be taken in so easily! Yet, how could he have known? He had never seen De Albor; he had supposed he was a full-blooded negro. Ballville had called him a black beast, but he must have been referring to his soul. De Albor, but for the betraying murk of his eyes, might pass anywhere for a white man.

The presence of those black men meant but one thing: they had followed him and De Albor, had seized Constance as she rushed from the cave. De Albor's evident fear bore a hideous implication; he had said the blacks wanted to sacrifice Constance—now she was in their hands.

"God!" The word burst from McGrath's lips, startling in the stillness, startling to the speaker. He was electrified; a few moments before he had been dumb. But now he discovered he could move his lips, his tongue. Life was stealing back through his dead limbs; they stung as if with returning circulation. Frantically he encouraged that sluggish flow. Laboriously he worked his extremities, his fingers, hands, wrists and finally, with a surge of wild triumph, his arms and legs. Perhaps De Albor's hellish drug had lost some of its power through age. Perhaps McGrath's unusual stamina threw off the effects as another man could not have done.

The tunnel door had not been closed, and McGrath knew why: they did not want to shut out the insects which would soon dispose of a helpless body; already the pests were streaming through the door, a noisome horde.

McGrath rose at last, staggering drunkenly, but with his vitality surging more strongly each second. When he tottered from the cave, no living thing met his glare. Hours had passed since the negroes had departed with their prey. He strained his ears for the drum. It was silent. The stillness rose like an invisible black mist around him. Stumblingly he splashed along the rock-trail that led to hard ground. Had the blacks taken their captive back to the death-haunted Manor, or deeper into the pinelands?

Their tracks were thick in the mud: half a dozen pairs of bare, splay feet, the slender prints of Constance's shoes, the marks of De Albor's Turkish slippers. He followed them with increasing difficulty as the ground grew higher and harder.

He would have missed the spot where they turned off the dim trail but for the fluttering of a bit of silk in the faint

breeze. Constance had brushed against a tree-trunk there, and the rough bark had shredded off a fragment of her dress. The band had been headed east, toward the Manor. At the spot where the bit of cloth hung, they had turned sharply southward. The matted pine needles showed no tracks, but disarranged vines and branches bent aside marked their progress, until McGrath, following these signs, came out upon another trail leading southward.

Here and there were marshy spots, and these showed the prints of feet, bare and shod. McGrath hastened along the trail, pistol in hand, in full possession of his faculties at last. His face was grim and pale. De Albor had not had an opportunity to disarm him after striking that treacherous blow. Both the octoroon and the blacks of the pinelands believed him to be lying helpless back in Lost Cave. That, at least, was to his advantage.

He kept straining his ears in vain for the drum he had heard earlier in the day. The silence did not reassure him. In a voodoo sacrifice drums would be thundering, but he knew he was dealing with something even more ancient and abhorrent than voodoo.

Voodoo was comparatively a young religion, after all, born in the hills of Haiti. Behind the froth of voodooism rose the grim religions of Africa, like granite cliffs glimpsed through a mask of green fronds. Voodooism was a mewling infant beside the black, immemorial colossus that had reared its terrible shape in the older land through uncounted ages. Zambebwei! The very name sent a shudder through him, symbolic of horror and fear. It was more than the name of a country and the mysterious tribe that inhabited that country; it signified something fearfully old and evil, something that had survived its natural epoch—a religion of the Night, and a deity whose name was Death and Horror.

He had seen no negro cabins. He knew these were farther to the east and south, most of them, huddling along the banks of the river and the tributary creeks. It was the instinct of the black man to build his habitation by a river, as he had built by the Congo, the Nile and the Niger since Time's first gray dawn. Zambebwei! The word beat like the throb of a tom-tom through the brain of Bristol McGrath. The soul of the black man had not changed, through the slumberous centuries. Change might come in the clangor of city streets, in the raw rhythms of Harlem; but the swamps of the Mississippi do not differ enough from the swamps of the Congo to work any great transmutation in the spirit of a race that was old before the first white king wove the thatch of his wattled hut-palace.

Following that winding path through the twilight dimness of the big pines, McGrath did not find it in his soul to marvel that black slimy tentacles from the depths of Africa had stretched across the world to breed nightmares in an alien land. Certain natural conditions produce certain effects, breed certain pestilences of body or mind, regardless of their geographical situation. The river-haunted pinelands were as abysmal in their way as were the reeking African jungles.

The trend of the trail was away from the river. The land sloped very gradually upward, and all signs of marsh vanished.

THE trail widened, showing signs of frequent use. McGrath became nervous. At any moment he might meet someone. He took to the thick woods alongside the trail, and forced his way onward, each movement sounding cannon-loud to his whetted ears. Sweating with nervous tension, he came presently upon

a smaller path, which meandered in the general direction he wished to go. The pinelands were crisscrossed by such paths.

He followed it with greater ease and stealth, and presently, coming to a crook in it, saw it join the main trail. Near the point of junction stood a small log cabin, and between him and the cabin squatted a big black man. This man was hidden behind the bole of a huge pine beside the narrow path, and peering around it toward the cabin. Obviously he was spying on someone, and it was quickly apparent who this was, as John De Albor came to the door and stared despairingly down the wide trail. The black watcher stiffened and lifted his fingers to his mouth as if to sound a far-carrying whistle, but De Albor shrugged his shoulders helplessly and turned back into the cabin again. The negro relaxed, though he did not alter his vigilance.

What this portended, McGrath did not know, nor did he pause to speculate. At the sight of De Albor a red mist turned the sunlight to blood, in which the black body before him floated like an ebony goblin.

A panther stealing upon its kill would have made as much noise as McGrath made in his glide down the path toward the squatting black. He was aware of no personal animosity toward the man, who was but an obstacle in his path of vengeance. Intent on the cabin, the black man did not hear that stealthy approach. Oblivious to all else, he did not move or turn—until the pistol butt descended on his woolly skull with an impact that stretched him senseless among the pine needles.

McGrath crouched above his motionless victim, listening. There was no sound near by—but suddenly, far away, there rose a long-drawn shriek that shuddered and died away. The blood congealed in McGrath's veins. Once before he had heard that sound—in the low forest-covered hills that fringe the borders of forbidden Zambebwei; his black boys had turned the color of ashes and fallen on their faces. What it was he did not know; and the explanation offered by the shuddering natives had been too monstrous to be accepted by a rational mind. They called it the voice of the god of Zambebwei.

Stung to action, McGrath rushed down the path and hurled himself against the back door of the cabin. He did not know how many blacks were inside; he did not care. He was berserk with grief and fury.

The door crashed inward under the impact. He lit on his feet inside, crouching, gun leveled hip-high, lips asnarl.

But only one man faced him—John De Albor, who sprang to his feet with a startled cry. The gun dropped from McGrath's fingers. Neither lead nor steel could glut his hate now. It must be with naked hands, turning back the pages of civilization to the red dawn days of the primordial.

With a growl that was less like the cry of a man than the grunt of a charging lion, McGrath's fierce hands locked about the octoroon's throat. De Albor was borne backward by the hurtling impact, and the men crashed together over a camp cot, smashing it to ruins. And as they tumbled on the dirt floor, McGrath set himself to kill his enemy with his bare fingers.

The octoroon was a tall man, rangy and strong. But against the berserk white man he had no chance. He was hurled about like a sack of straw, battered and smashed savagely against the floor, and the iron fingers that were crushing his throat sank deeper and deeper until his tongue protruded from his gaping blue lips and his eyes were starting from his

head. With death no more than a hand's breadth from the octoroon, some measure of sanity returned to McGrath.

He shook his head like a dazed bull; eased his terrible grip a trifle, and snarled: "Where is the girl? Quick, before I kill you!"

De Albor retched and fought for breath, ashen-faced. "The blacks!" he gasped. "They have taken her to be the Bride of Zemba! I could not prevent them. They demand a sacrifice. I offered them you, but they said you were paralyzed and would die anyway—they were cleverer than I thought. They followed me back to the Manor from the spot where we left the Arab in the road—followed us from the Manor to the island.

"They are out of hand—mad with blood-lust. But even I, who know black men as none else knows them, I had forgotten that not even a priest of Zambebwei can control them when the fire of worship runs in their veins. I am their priest and master—yet when I sought to save the girl, they forced me into this cabin and set a man to watch me until the sacrifice is over. You must have killed him; he would never have let you enter here."

With a chill grimness, McGrath picked up his pistol.

"You came here as Richard Ballville's friend," he said unemotionally. "To get possession of Constance Brand, you made devil-worshippers out of the black people. You deserve death for that. When the European authorities that govern Africa catch a priest of Zambebwei, they hang him. You have admitted that you are a priest. Your life is forfeit on that score, too. But it is because of your hellish teachings that Constance Brand is to die, and it's for that reason that I'm going to blow out your brains."

John De Albor shriveled. "She is not dead yet," he gasped, great drops of perspiration dripping from his ashy face. "She will not die until the moon is high above the pines. It is full tonight, the Moon of Zambebwei. Don't kill me. Only I can save her. I know I failed before. But if I go to them, appear to them suddenly and without warning, they'll think it is because of supernatural powers that I was able to escape from the hut without being seen by the watchman. That will renew my prestige.

"You can't save her. You might shoot a few blacks, but there would still be scores left to kill you—and her. But I have a plan—yes, I am a priest of Zambebwei. When I was a boy I ran away from my Arab master and wandered far until I came to the land of Zambebwei. There I grew to manhood and became a priest, dwelling there until the white blood in me drew me out in the world again to learn the ways of the white men. When I came to America I brought a *Zemba* with me—I can not tell you how. . . .

"Let me save Constance Brand!" He was clawing at McGrath, shaking as if with an ague. "I love her, even as you love her. I will play fair with you both, I swear it! Let me save her! We can fight for her later, and I'll kill you if I can."

The frankness of that statement swayed McGrath more than anything else the octoroon could have said. It was a desperate gamble—but after all, Constance would be no worse off with John De Albor alive than she was already. She would be dead before midnight unless something was done swiftly.

"Where is the place of sacrifice?" asked McGrath.

"Three miles away, in an open glade," answered De Albor. "South, on the trail that runs past my cabin. All the blacks

are gathered there except my guard and some others who are watching the trail below the cabin. They are scattered out along it, the nearest out of sight of my cabin, but within sound of the loud, shrill whistle with which these people signal one another.

"This is my plan. You wait here in my cabin, or in the woods, as you choose. I'll avoid the watchers on the trail, and appear suddenly before the blacks at the House of Zemba. A sudden appearance will impress them deeply, as I said. I know I can not persuade them to abandon their plan, but I will make them postpone the sacrifice until just before dawn. And before that time I will manage to steal the girl and flee with her. I'll return to your hiding-place, and we'll fight our way out together."

McGrath laughed. "Do you think I'm an utter fool? You'd send your blacks to murder me, while you carried Constance away as you planned. I'm going with you. I'll hide at the edge of the clearing, to help you if you need help. And if you make a false move, I'll get you, if I don't get anybody else."

The octoroon's murky eyes glittered, but he nodded acquiescence.

"Help me bring your guard into the cabin," said McGrath. "He'll be coming to soon. We'll tie and gag him and leave him here."

The sun was setting and twilight was stealing over the pinelands as McGrath and his strange companion stole through the shadowy woods. They had circled to the west to avoid the watchers on the trail, and were now following on the many narrow footpaths which traced their way through the forest. Silence reigned ahead of them, and McGrath mentioned this.

"Zemba is a god of silence," muttered De Albor. "From sunset to sunrise on the night of the full moon, no drum is beaten. If a dog barks, it must be slain; if a baby cries, it must be killed. Silence locks the jaws of the people until Zemba roars. Only *his* voice is lifted on the night of the Moon of Zemba."

McGrath shuddered. The foul deity was an intangible spirit, of course, embodied only in legend; but De Albor spoke of it as a living thing.

A few stars were blinking out, and shadows crept through the thick woods, blurring the trunks of the trees that melted together in darkness. McGrath knew they could not be far from the House of Zemba. He sensed the close presence of a throng of people, though he heard nothing.

De Albor, ahead of him, halted suddenly, crouching. McGrath stopped, trying to pierce the surrounding mask of interlacing branches.

"What is it?" muttered the white man, reaching for his pistol.

De Albor shook his head, straightening. McGrath could not see the stone in his hand, caught up from the earth as he stooped.

"Do you hear something?" demanded McGrath.

De Albor motioned him to lean forward, as if to whisper in his ear. Caught off his guard, McGrath bent toward him —even so he divined the treacherous African's intention, but it was too late. The stone in De Albor's hand crashed sickeningly against the white man's temple. McGrath went down like a slaughtered ox, and De Albor sped away down the path to vanish like a ghost in the gloom.

5. *The Voice of Zemba*

IN THE darkness of the woodland path McGrath stirred at last, and staggered groggily to his feet. That desperate blow

might have crushed the skull of a man whose physique and vitality were not that of a bull. His head throbbed and there was dried blood on his temple; but his strongest sensation was burning scorn at himself for having again fallen victim to John De Albor. And yet, who would have suspected that move? He knew De Albor would kill him if he could, but he had not expected an attack *before* the rescue of Constance. The fellow was dangerous and unpredictable as a cobra. Had his pleas to be allowed to attempt Constance's rescue been but a ruse to escape death at the hands of McGrath?

McGrath stared dizzily at the stars that gleamed through the ebon branches, and sighed with relief to see that the moon had not yet risen. The pinewoods were black as only pinelands can be, with a darkness that was almost tangible, like a substance that could be cut with a knife.

McGrath had reason to be grateful for his rugged constitution. Twice that day had John De Albor outwitted him, and twice the white man's iron frame had survived the attack. His gun was in his scabbard, his knife in its sheath. De Albor had not paused to search, had not paused for a second stroke to make sure. Perhaps there had been a tinge of panic in the African's actions.

Well, this did not change matters a great deal. He believed that De Albor would make an effort to save the girl. And McGrath intended to be on hand, whether to play a lone hand, or to aid the octoroon. This was no time to hold grudges, with the girl's life at stake. He groped down the path, spurred by a rising glow in the east.

He came upon the glade almost before he knew it. The moon hung in the low branches, blood-red, high enough to illumine it and the throng of black people who squatted in a vast semicircle about it, facing the moon. Their rolling eyes gleamed milkily in the shadows, their features were grotesque masks. None spoke. No head turned toward the bushes behind which he crouched.

He had vaguely expected blazing fires, a blood-stained altar, drums and the chant of maddened worshippers; that would be voodoo. But this was not voodoo, and there was a vast gulf between the two cults. There were no fires, no altars. But the breath hissed through his locked teeth. In a far land he had sought in vain for the rituals of Zambebwei; now he looked upon them within forty miles of the spot where he was born.

In the center of the glade the ground rose slightly to a flat level. On this stood a heavy iron-bound stake that was indeed but the sharpened trunk of a good-sized pine driven deep into the ground. And there was something living chained to that stake—something which caused McGrath to catch his breath in horrified unbelief.

He was looking upon a god of Zambebwei. Stories had told of such creatures, wild tales drifting down from the borders of the forbidden country, repeated by shivering natives about jungle fires, passed along until they reached the ears of skeptical white traders. McGrath had never really believed the stories, though he had gone searching for the being they described. For they spoke of a beast that was a blasphemy against nature—a beast that sought food strange to its natural species.

The thing chained to the stake was an ape, but such an ape as the world at large never dreamed of, even in nightmares. Its shaggy gray hair was shot with silver that shone in the rising moon; it looked gigantic as it squatted ghoulishly on its haunches. Upright, on its bent, gnarled legs, it would be as tall as a man, and

much broader and thicker. But its prehensile fingers were armed with talons like those of a tiger—not the heavy blunt nails of the natural anthropoid, but the cruel simitar-curved claws of the great carnivora. Its face was like that of a gorilla, low-browed, flaring-nostriled, chinless; but when it snarled, its wide flat nose wrinkled like that of a great cat, and the cavernous mouth disclosed saber-like fangs, the fangs of a beast of prey. This was Zemba, the creature sacred to the people of the land of Zambebwei—a monstrosity, a violation of an accepted law of nature—a carnivorous ape. Men had laughed at the story, hunters and zoologists and traders.

But now McGrath knew that such creatures dwelt in black Zambebwei and were worshipped, as primitive man is prone to worship an obscenity or perversion of nature. Or a survival of past eons: that was what the flesh-eating apes of Zambebwei were—survivors of a forgotten epoch, remnants of a vanished prehistoric age, when nature was experimenting with matter, and life took many monstrous forms.

The sight of the monstrosity filled McGrath with revulsion; it was abysmal, a reminder of that brutish and horror-shadowed past out of which mankind crawled so painfully, eons ago. This thing was an affront to sanity; it belonged in the dust of oblivion with the dinosaur, the mastodon, and the saber-toothed tiger.

It looked massive beyond the stature of modern beasts—shaped on the plan of another age, when all things were cast in a mightier mold. He wondered if the revolver at his hip would have any effect on it; wondered by what dark and subtle means John De Albor had brought the monster from Zambebwei to the pinelands.

But something was happening in the glade, heralded by the shaking of the brute's chain as it thrust forward its nightmare-head.

From the shadows of the trees came a file of black men and women, young, naked except for a mantle of monkey-skins and parrot-feathers thrown over the shoulders of each. More regalia brought by John De Albor, undoubtedly. They formed a semicircle at a safe distance from the chained brute, and sank to their knees, bending their heads to the ground before him. Thrice this motion was repeated. Then, rising, they formed two lines, men and women facing one another, and began to dance; at least it might by courtesy be called a dance. They hardly moved their feet at all, but all other parts of their bodies were in constant motion, twisting, rotating, writhing. The measured, rhythmical movements had no connection at all with the voodoo dances McGrath had witnessed. This dance was disquietingly archaic in its suggestion, though even more depraved and bestial—naked primitive passions framed in a cynical debauchery of motion.

No sound came from the dancers, or from the votaries squatting about the ring of trees. But the ape, apparently infuriated by the continued movements, lifted his head and sent into the night the frightful shriek McGrath had heard once before that day—he had heard it in the hills that border black Zambebwei. The brute plunged to the end of his heavy chain, foaming and gnashing his fangs, and the dancers fled like spume blown before a gust of wind. They scattered in all directions—and then McGrath started up in his covert, barely stifling a cry.

From the deep shadows had come a figure, gleaming tawnily in contrast to the black forms about it. It was John De Albor, naked except for a mantle of

bright feathers, and on his head a circlet of gold that might have been forged in Atlantis. In his hand he bore a gold wand that was the scepter of the high priests of Zambebwei.

Behind him came a pitiful figure, at the sight of which the moon-lit forest reeled to McGrath's sight.

Constance had been drugged. Her face was that of a sleep-walker; she seemed not aware of her peril, or the fact that she was naked. She walked like a robot, mechanically responding to the urge of the cord tied about her white neck. The other end of that cord was in John De Albor's hand, and he half led, half dragged her toward the horror that squatted in the center of the glade. De Albor's face was ashy in the moonlight that now flooded the glade with molten silver. Sweat beaded his skin. His eyes gleamed with fear and ruthless determination. And in a staggering instant McGrath knew that the man had failed, that he had been unable to save Constance, and that now, to save his own life from his suspicious followers, he himself was dragging the girl to the gory sacrifice.

No vocal sound came from the votaries, but hissing intake of breath sucked through thick lips, and the rows of black bodies swayed like reeds in the wind. The great ape leaped up, his face a slavering devil's mask; he howled with frightful eagerness, gnashing his great fangs, that yearned to sink into that soft white flesh, and the hot blood beneath. He surged against his chain, and the stout post quivered. McGrath, in the bushes, stood frozen, paralyzed by the imminence of horror. And then John De Albor stepped behind the unresisting girl and gave her a powerful push that sent her reeling forward to pitch headlong on the ground under the monster's talons.

And simultaneously McGrath moved. His move was instinctive rather than conscious. His .44 jumped into his hand and spoke, and the great ape screamed like a man death-stricken and reeled, clapping misshapen hands to its head.

An instant the throng crouched frozen, white eyes bulging, jaws hanging slack. Then before any could move, the ape, blood gushing from his head, wheeled, seized the chain in both hands and snapped it with a wrench that twisted the heavy links apart as if they had been paper.

John De Albor stood directly before the mad brute, paralyzed in his tracks. Zemba roared and leaped, and the African went down under him, disemboweled by the razor-like talons, his head crushed to a crimson pulp by a sweep of the great paw.

Ravening, the monster charged among the votaries, clawing and ripping and smiting, screaming intolerably. Zambebwei spoke, and death was in his bellowing. Screaming, howling, fighting, the black people scrambled over one another in their mad flight. Men and women went down under those shearing talons, were dismembered by those gnashing fangs. It was a red drama of the primitive—destruction amuck and riot, the primordial embodied in fangs and talons, gone mad and plunging in slaughter. Blood and brains deluged the earth, black bodies and limbs and fragments of bodies littered the moonlighted glade in ghastly heaps before the last of the howling wretches found refuge among the trees. The sounds of their blundering, panic-stricken flight drifted back.

McGrath had leaped from his covert almost as soon as he had fired. Unnoticed by the terrified negroes, and himself scarcely cognizant of the slaugh-

ter raging around him, he raced across the glade toward the pitiful white figure that lay limply beside the iron-bound stake.

"Constance!" he cried, gathering her to his breast.

Languidly she opened her cloudy eyes. He held her close, heedless of the screams and devastation surging about them. Slowly recognition grew in those lovely eyes.

"Bristol!" she murmured, incoherently. Then she screamed, clung to him, sobbing hysterically. "Bristol! They told me you were dead! The blacks! The horrible blacks! They're going to kill me! They were going to kill De Albor too, but he promised to sacrifice——"

"Don't, girl, don't!" He subdued her frantic tremblings. "It's all right, now——" Abruptly he looked up into the grinning blood-stained face of nightmare and death. The great ape had ceased to rend his dead victims and was slinking toward the living pair in the center of the glade. Blood oozed from the wound in its sloping skull that had maddened it.

McGrath sprang toward it, shielding the prostrate girl; his pistol spurted flame, pouring a stream of lead into the mighty breast as the beast charged.

On it came, and his confidence waned. Bullet after bullet he sent crashing into its vitals, but it did not halt. Now he dashed the empty gun full into the gargoyle face without effect, and with a lurch and a roll it had him in its grasp. As the giant arms closed crushingly about him, he abandoned all hope, but following his fighting instinct to the last, he drove his dagger hilt-deep in the shaggy belly.

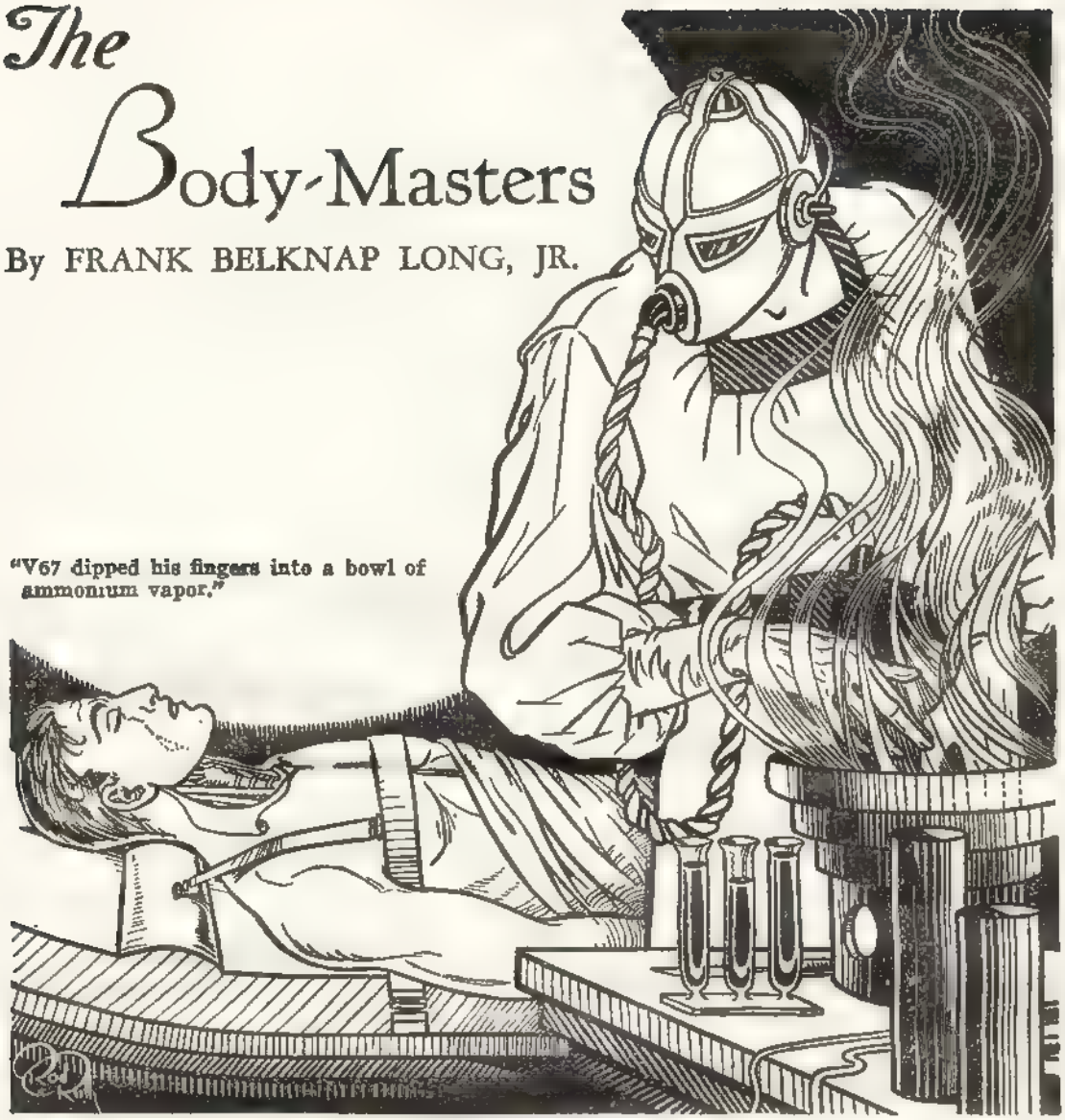
But even as he struck, he felt a shudder run through the gigantic frame. The great arms fell away—and then he was hurled to the ground in the last death throe of the monster, and the thing was swaying, its face a death-mask. Dead on its feet, it crumpled, toppled to the ground, quivered and lay still. Not even a man-eating ape of Zambebwei could survive that close-range volley of mushrooming lead.

As the man staggered up, Constance rose and reeled into his arms, crying hysterically.

"It's all right *now,* Constance," he panted, crushing her to him. "The Zemba's dead; De Albor's dead; Ballville's dead; the negroes have run away. There's nothing to prevent us leaving now. The Moon of Zambebwei was the end for them. But it's the beginning of life for us."

The Body-Masters

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.



"V67 dipped his fingers into a bowl of ammonium vapor."

A strange weird story of the far-distant future—a tale of mechanical robots and synthetic love

RAY-BRONZED and dripping, Gland Surgeon V67 emerged from the sun pool, and flicked the water from his hair and eyebrows. Then he stooped, and thrust a sturdy, muscular arm into the pale green water. The arm was seized by slim hands, and a voice said: "Help me out, darling."

V67 raised from the water an adorable form. His face was aglow with boyish rapture as he set it down beside him on the edge of the pool.

Mechanical Companion GH8 looked up at him. Her lips were parted in a smile, and the disk in her bosom said: "It is lovely up here in the sun. Kiss me, darling."

V67 bent, and implanted a fervent, lingering kiss on the soft, pneumatic lips of Mechanical Companion GH8. GH8

sighed, and her arms crept about the dripping shoulders of her very human and warm-blooded escort.

For a moment they embraced in silence. Then V67 gently untangled her arms, and asked: "Cold, my sweet?"

Mechanical Companion GH8 said nothing. The disk was exhausted. V67 debated for a moment with himself. Supervisor of Emotion T74 had supplied Companion GH8 with only one reply disk. He knew that if he rewound the record mechanism and set GH8 back in the pool she would swim and splash about and begin to talk to him again. But he was by no means certain that the glamor and enchantment would survive a second trial. Besides, there was a chill wind blowing, and his flesh was breaking out in goose-pimples.

With infinite tenderness he bent and lifted the fragile rubber form of Mechanical Companion GH8 from the gleaming, metallic margin of the pool. He had been compelled to time his questions so that they would accord with the answer intervals on the disk, but now he could talk to her more freely, and still preserve an illusion of reality.

Murmuring endearments he carried her across the sky garden and set her gently down in one of the racks which the Supervisor of Emotion had provided for exhausted companions. For a moment he stood gazing down at her with glowing eyes. Then, abruptly, he turned, and strode to the vacuum chute.

Three other men were waiting to enter the chute. One of them, a thin, ascetic-looking individual in striped swimming-shorts, was an associate of V67's at the Gland Surgery. V67 greeted him with upraised palm.

"Mechanical Companion GH8 was glorious," he said. "No man would *want* to divorce his wife these days. I was getting frightfully bored and despondent, but GH8 has corrected all that. Don't you like the Companions, J78?"

The man in shorts shook his head. "If I had my way these recreational gardens would be abolished," he said. "We are becoming a race of self-indulgent flat-fish. I like the pools here, and the squash-ball courts, but the Companions are utterly pernicious."

V67 frowned. "You need a gland injection, J78," he said. "A shot of adrenalin and perhaps a little thyroid. You talk like a Twentieth Century puritan."

J78 grunted. "And you behave like a perfect sybarite," he said. "It is a good thing we are not living in the Twentieth Century. Or even in the Twenty-first. The ancient moralists would have put you in a lethal chamber."

V67 laughed. "I'm not as bad as you think, J78," he said.

J78 grunted again.

One of the waiting men heaved himself up to the aluminum slide at the pinnacle of the vacuum chute and relaxed with a contented sigh. His weight caused the slide to tilt slightly. As he vanished from sight V67 said: "Do you mind if I go next? I'm ten minutes overdue at the surgery."

J78 and the other man nodded.

With a brisk, athletic leap V67 surmounted the slide and settled his long limbs in a reposeful attitude. Immediately the slide tilted, and released him. For an instant the soft blue sky above the sky garden was visible to his upturned gaze. Then it dimmed and vanished. A faint droning arose from the depths beneath, and a thick blanket of darkness settled about him.

He was soon speeding with a terrific velocity in a vertical direction. The chute was an almost perfect vacuum and he was

compelled to hold his breath as the miles beneath him telescoped into a thrumming spatial porridge. The thrumming came from the pounding blood in his ears.

As he fell, his mind became a kaleidoscopic canvas. Something in the swift rhythms of the descent generated a mental attitude akin to slumber. As in a dream of infinite magnitude and brief duration his mind surged in the blackness.

In visual splendor he beheld a vivid panorama of Mechanical Companions dancing, racing and swimming for the edification of tired and despondent husbands. Their lithe, graceful bodies glistened in the screen-filtered sunlight on the flower-garlanded roof-tops of Cosmopolis.

Another vision flashed across his mind. He saw the Divorce Bureaus in the Fifth Level kiosks, saw the crowded booths and the rapidly growing mountains of writs and petitions. He saw the long, long files of hopeless women, the wan clerks, and—chief objects of pity—the bored and dispirited husbands.

It was a vision of the past. As V67 sped downward in the darkness the gloomy and depressing picture was replaced by a verbal hallucination. V67 distinctly heard the Dictator of Emotional Arts affirm: "The normal male will at times fervently crave the solace of a new face, and mysterious, unknown hands upon his brow. 'The wonder and enticement of a strange woman.' You are all familiar with the phrase. But if this antisocial urge could be surmounted as soon as it arises, in a way that would not provoke jealousy, and that would——" The voice droned on, became confused and indistinct.

V67 had another blinding vision of the sky gardens and their lithe-limbed and rhythmically moving dispensers of solace. It was a joy to reflect that Mechanical Companions were already in attendance in thirty-three of Cosmopolis' sky gardens. The vogue, introduced at the beginning of the year 5678, was spreading like wildfire, and would undoubtedly tend to preserve and glorify the time-honored institution of monogamous marriage. No sensible wife could be jealous of a mechanical, pneumatic leisure-hour companion. It was the beginning of a new dawn in the emotional lives of thousands of husbands, and V67 had no misgivings as slowly from amidst the congeries of racing, dancing forms a lovely face wreathed in silver talc emerged, and usurped his vision. He saw again the enticing pneumatic lips of his own dear Mechanical Companion GH8, and heard her whisper: "It is glorious here in the sun. Are you happy, my darling?"

Metallic arms crept about him in the darkness, and the droning became a roar as of cyclopean dynamos.

THE white-aproned street sanitationists of Level TG assisted him from the basal slide at the circular lower exit to Vacuum Chute H65. As he arose in the incandescent light the jointed basal slide shot upward. It would contact his associate J78 a thousand feet above the exit, and carry him downward in its mechanical arms.

V67 did not wait for his associate to arrive. He did not like J78. The man was a prig and a hypocrite. Striding rapidly along the pressed resovin pavement of Level TG he drew the spice-scented air deep into his lungs and exhaled with zest.

Ordinarily he shunned drugs. The mild intoxication produced by the health-air which circulated freely on Level TG, and the other non-recreational levels, was all the stimulation he needed. On this occasion, however, he extracted a

small bluish vial from his upper tunic pocket, and poured upon his palm six grains of astravasin.

Astravasin deadened and dissipated the softer emotions, and stimulated cold, scientific zeal. It was more favored by women than men, but V67 found it occasionally beneficial. He had sufficient virility to dismiss as irrelevant the conventional sneers which were directed against the male astravasin users.

He snuffed the drug into his nostrils and accelerated his pace. He was facing a trying ordeal. The patient awaiting him in the Gland Surgery was a victim of a hideous maladjustment of secretions. The wretch had actually reverted to the mores of the jungle, and killed his wife in a fit of jealous rage.

To steady his perspective, V67 walked to the edge of the pavement and looked down into the abyss beneath him. Far below, the outer extremities of the lower level platforms abutted above the great central artery of Cosmopolis. Down, down he stared, past the projecting tiers and platforms, past the laboratory levels and the industrial levels and the agrarian levels till his gaze rested on the cyclopean turbines five miles below.

A vertigo swept over him. He withdrew his gaze and walked on. Level TG was a running tier of laboratories. At intervals of fifty feet, circular doors opened in the resovin façade that ran the length of the entire cityward wall of the level. They were surmounted by blue-litten classification plates bearing labels in radiumite script. He passed the Skin and Exoskeleton Correctional Laboratory, the Sympathetic System Clinic, the Muscle and Nerve Surgery, the Epithelial and Glandular Tissue Laboratory, and the Tumor Removal Center. There was a long line of patients waiting to enter the Removal Center.

V67 shivered inwardly. He did not like to think about cancer. It was a major blight—the one appalling malady that had successfully defied the medical innovations of fifty centuries. A quarter of the population was afflicted with malignant tumors of one sort or another. The Health Supervisors affirmed that the malady was directly traceable to over-indulgence in electric baths and cosmic-ray rejuvenators, but V67 was skeptical of their glib and facile explanations.

He met several co-workers as he progressed toward the surgery. Bio-chemist H43, grave and severe in his india-rubber frock, greeted him with upraised palm as he emerged from Bio-chemical Clinic R66, and T52 saluted him from the edge of the pavement. He passed quickly by K99, L90 and W43.

"How is your wife?" asked W43.

V67 said: "Very well, thanks," and experienced a momentary qualm. It was absurd, of course. In adoring Mechanical Companion GH8 he had adhered to a highly moral conduct pattern. His wife could not possibly resent his attentions to an artificial woman. The Dictator of Emotional Arts had proclaimed after extensive research and experimentation that no normal wife *could* be jealous of a Mechanical Companion. Jealousy was a disease anyway—a pathological reversion to a primitive level of thought and feeling—but even when it did arise, its malignant shafts were directed against flesh-and-blood realities. The Dictator of Emotional Arts was a man of vast erudition, and V67 was content to abide by his decision.

V67 was now abreast of the Gland Surgery. Turning in at the bulb-surmounted entrance he passed quickly down a long, blue-lit corridor, and nodded to the attendant at the door of the operating-room.

"F56 has just been asking for you," said the attendant. "Your patient isn't standing it very well."

V67 nodded gravely. He was conscious of an intense cerebral curiosity, but sympathy and compassion were alien to his mood. The astravasin was circulating freely in his blood-stream. With ceremonious precision he removed his tunic and asked the attendant for his antiseptic suit and mask.

The attendant opened a numbered drawer in a metal cabinet at his elbow, and handed V67 a folded rubber garment and a black surgical mask.

The mask was a cumbersome contrivance that went completely over his head. It had eyeholes of violet glass, and a long, twisted breathing-tube that terminated in a square metallic box in the region of the wearer's navel. In appearance it was strikingly like the Western European gas masks of the World Wars of 1914, 1936, 1967 and 1987 in the primitive artifacts wing of the Museum of Historical Antiquities on Level K97.

HAVING adjusted the mask and pulled the thin rubber antiseptic garment up over his shoulders, V67 nodded to the attendant and passed into the operating-room.

The operating-room was bathed in a diffused purple light. It was heavily impregnated with hylofoam, that powerful and dangerous anesthetic which exerted a numbing influence on the lower nerve centers, leaving them almost insensible to pain and yet with sufficient vitality to relay messages to the brain and spinal cord. Its action was insidious and curious. It entered the blood-stream by absorption through lungs and skin, and altered the vitalistic content of individual cells in every organ and tissue of the human body. Invented in the Twenty-third Century, it had displaced all the cruder anesthetics of an earlier age.

It had one disadvantage: it did not completely do away with pain. But as the victim of its fumes remained in full possession of his faculties and could even discourse rationally with his dissectors, the surgical workers who refused to countenance its use were branded as Twentieth Century sentimentalists, or worse.

V67 walked slowly across the vast, dome-ceilinged operating-room in the direction of Table 4R6. He breathed deeply of the pure oxygen which circulated beneath his antiseptic mask, and stopped occasionally to greet associates as he passed between the long tiers of tables. Three hundred and twenty-four operations were in progress.

Some of his associates were selecting and arranging their instruments, others were actually at work on the glands of their human subjects, and a few were busy rectifying blunders, or guarding against future mistakes by dissecting the dead.

When he arrived at Table 4R6 the tall form of Gland Surgeon F56 arose from a stooping posture, laid down a gleaming metallic instrument, and advanced to greet him: "You're ten minutes late," he said reproachfully, through the audition tube in the lower left-hand corner of his mask. "You *know* I'm too nervous to work past my schedule. My nerves are all shot. Why didn't you relieve me?"

"I'm sorry, F56," said V67. "I was sun-bathing in a sky garden, and you know how exacting the new Companions are. You'd better take a shot of adrenalin before you leave."

He paused an instant, then asked: "How's the patient?"

F56 lowered his head. "He's lost consciousness," he said. "He's horribly over-emotional, I'm afraid."

"I should think he would be!" exclaimed V67. "A man jealous enough to subject his wife to an atomic bombardment just because she exchanged five-minute kisses with a turbine mechanic is mighty shabby human material."

"Jealousy is a revolting disease," affirmed F56. "A superstitious, utterly illogical hang-over from the ages of savagery. That man is actually living in the Twentieth Century."

"All strong emotion is pathological," assented V67 gravely. He was conscious that he was reaffirming a truism, but he had to say something to ease the tension. F56 was obviously worried about the man on the table. He had lost four cases in as many weeks, and the Chief of Staff was beginning to regard him with suspicion. If the suspicion became a certainty the Chief of Staff might conceivably decide that F56's place was where his patient was now lying. It was a contingency which F56 didn't like to think about. He loved the full, abundant life which his slightly unstable glands afforded him.

V67, despite the astravasin in his blood-stream, could sympathize with this very human weakness of his associate. He was himself slightly unstable. Mechanical Companion GH8 could bear witness to that.

Gripping his associate by the shoulder, he murmured reassuringly: "Don't worry, F56. I'll bring him out of it."

"Thanks, old man," said F56.

His gait was slightly unsteady as he turned from the table and made his way slowly across the vast, domed room.

With a sigh V67 moved forward, and stood for a moment staring intently down at the white, haggard face of the man on the table. The subject was young, and physically robust. The surgeons of an earlier and less remorseless age would have shuddered at the way V67's associate had taken advantage of that robustness. There was only a small area of firm flesh remaining.

V67 did not shudder. The man on the table had been guilty of an anti-social act, and society insisted, as it had every right to do, upon a surgical corrective. The man had deliberately reduced his wife to an inert mass of gray ash by bombarding her with an atomic disintegrator. Men who succumbed to violent emotions were a menace to the peace and well-being of the Corporate Commonwealth. The surgeons of Cosmopolis were the benevolent masters, the therapeutic overlords of anti-social bodies. V67 dipped his fingers into a bowl of ammonium vapor, and rubbed them across the young man's brow.

Slowly, unsteadily, the patient's eyelids flicked open. For a moment he stared up in dazed bewilderment at his new benefactor.

Conquering his disgust and enmity, V67 said: "How do you feel now, boy?"

The young man's eyes showed an awareness of pain. He essayed a twisted smile. "I feel pretty rotten," he said. "How long is it going to take, Surgeon?"

"Not long," said V67. "Not long, boy. We've removed a portion of your thyroid and right lobe pituitary, and cut away practically all of your adrenal cortex. A few stitches, and we'll be finished. I rather suspect that psychopaths will find that you will not require any mental reconditioning. The jealousy spasm was purely glandular."

"You mean, I wouldn't have—have disintegrated her if my glands had been normal?" asked the youth. His facial muscles contracted pitifully as he spoke.

V67 was busy with his surgical dressing. He nodded sadly as he sewed and kneaded the lacerated tissues into a semblance of normality. "I'm afraid the

glands were at the root of all your troubles, boy," he said. "Your parental supervisors should have corrected the maladjustment in childhood."

"But several thousand years ago men often killed their wives," said the youth.

"Several thousand years ago men murdered one another on a wholesale scale in hideous blood-letting contests," said V67. "They had no control whatever. You can not justify your conduct by exalting the primitive, my lad. If our race has raised itself above the level of the jungle it has done so only by a long process of selective mating. When the eugenists of the Twenty-second Century started selecting stocks on a glandular basis they——"

"Were blind!" interrupted the youth, in desperation. "Blind, I tell you. War *was* awful, but love——"

V67 shrugged. "We still love," he said.

The youth's face twisted in a grimace. "You think you do," he said.

"We have overcome certain crude and violent prejudices, that is all," said V67 calmly. He wished the young man would not talk so much. His ceaseless, primitive chatter unnerved him, despite the astravasin in his blood-stream.

He did not realize that the young man was talking to keep up his courage. It was not so much the pain that the young man dreaded. He dreaded the thought that he would become like his benefactor —high-minded, impartial and serene.

But there was nothing the young man could do. He was bound and helpless. He would be turned into a cool, impersonal cog in the vast mechanism of the Corporate State. "Curse them!" he muttered, in jungle fury. "Curse them all!"

His resentment was short-lived. The excess glandular secretions were ceasing to stimulate his brain even as he spoke. With the glands removed, the remaining hormones became mild aids to normality instead of goads to anti-social action.

For exactly forty-five minutes V67 labored with painstaking care. Then he straightened, dipped his instruments in a basin of pale blue antiseptic, and drew a thin sheet of transparent rubber over the breast and limbs of his patient.

"You'll be all right now," he said. "I'll prescribe a cathartic, and your digestion will be checked by the dietician."

The youth's eyes were melancholy and resigned. "Thank you, Surgeon," he said.

TEN minutes later V67 was standing before a vacuum chute in the Release Corridor of Level TG. He was very tired. His work was exacting and arduous, and the unstable portions of his personality were in mild revolt. It was really unjust that he should be compelled to devote five hours a week to social labor, he told himself. It was his conviction that with a more equitable distribution of leisure and a more rigidly planned economy the work quotas could be substantially reduced.

"Your turn, V67," said an impatient, red-haired bio-chemist on the opposite side of the chute.

V67 nodded, climbed up and relaxed on the broad, unstable slide. The slide tilted and released him. He thought of many things as he shot downward in the darkness. The faces of Mechanical Companion GH8 and his wife vied for supremacy in his mind. Eventually they merged into a single image, and he sighed in rapture.

It was a mystical ideal he beheld now —the composite of all feminine loveliness. Mechanical Companion GH8 was simply another aspect of his wife's personality. It was absurd to imagine that

the concept *woman* did not embrace a variety of lovely forms. Individual women were merely facets, isolated aspects of one eternal and glorious reality—the feminine principle, imperishable, mysterious and sublime.

"My own sweet wife and dear companion," he murmured, in mystical adoration.

Down, down he swept. The blood throbbed in his temples, his pulses ached. Finally a droning began and he felt something collide with his nether extremities. Then the steel-cold arms of the jointed basal slide crept about him, and his consciousness reverted to a more practical level.

He emerged in a glare of incandescence. The sun-simulating arc lamps which lined the cityward wall of Suburban Home Level RH shone down upon him in radiant splendor, and a tempered buoyancy came upon him as he climbed from the slide and turned his steps in the direction of his suburban home.

He hoped that his wife had heard no disquieting rumors. The sky gardens were far removed, both spatially and spiritually, from the quiet haven of his home. As he walked between the cyclopean tiers of potted shrubs, the great domed aquariums with their myriads of brilliant-hued and exotic fishes and crustaceans, and felt upon his brow the warm sea breezes still redolent with the spices of far islands and archipelagoes as they emerged from hundreds of swinging odorphones, a look of supreme contentment came into his face.

So rapidly did he walk that he traversed the distance between the chute exit and the portals of his suburban home without meeting anyone. Stepping into the vacuum lift he was whirled up fifty-five stories, and emerged in the community corridor adjoining his wife's quarters.

The corridor was deserted. He was glad of this, for he did not wish to talk to dull and gossipy B54, or exuberant and boisterous C88, or any of the other tenants of Story 55.

As he tiptoed across the floor to the door of his wife's television room a great joy came upon him. He felt confident that she would be sitting relaxed in the darkness, enjoying an African or Asian telolog. He would steal up behind her and implant a fifteen-second kiss on the nape of her neck, immediately beneath the two blond curls which intertwined so adorably below her coiffure.

He laid his hand on the door and drew it outward. The television room was in darkness as he had anticipated, and his wife was clearly visible from the doorway. Clearly visible, and leaning on the shoulder of another man!

As his gaze swept the room he felt his flesh go suddenly cold. It was an optical illusion, of course—a mad, cruel hallucination caused by the astravasin in his blood-stream.

Yet his wife was actually *whispering* in the darkness as she stroked the dark, curly hair of the other man. Her head rested on his right shoulder, and he was crushing her hand in his long, virile fingers.

"My dear, my darling," she whispered. "*You* understand me."

"It is glorious here in the darkness," said her companion.

Somehow the grave, mechanical tones of the speaker's voice seemed vaguely unnatural. V67 had no clear notion at first as to the cause of this. He simply stood trembling in the doorway, resisting the evidence of his senses, and telling himself over and over that it was the astravasin, the astravasin. The drug soothed at first, but later it heightened and distorted the perceptions of sense.

What he saw was surely nothing more than a visual illusion, the figments of a drug-fevered brain.

The attempt at evasion was tragically short-lived. Slowly, insidiously, the truth crept upon him, and he was shaken to the core of his being by the sickening realization that his wife had succumbed to the flatteries of that newest of fads and abominations — the sirupy-voiced male Mechanical Companion!

The horror of it was more than he could sanely endure. With an oath he slammed the door shut, and strode fiercely into the room.

His wife turned about, and screamed. Without uttering a word V67 lifted the Companion into the air and brought him down with violence on the tempered steel floor of the television room.

There ensued a crash. Something tinkled in the mannikin's chest, and a small revolving wheel emerged from a twisted sleeve, and rolled diagonally across the floor. With a curse V67 picked the detestable creature up, and hurled him across the room. Never in his life had he experienced such primitive, unregenerate wrath.

The Companion collided with the opposite wall and sank limply to the floor. As his head contacted the hard steel the record in his breast said: "Your husband does not esteem you as I do. I see you enwreathed in roses, bedewed in mists of glory. Your lips are like a lotus-flower, and the touch of your hand is a healing benison. When you are beside me the moon's splendor is enhanced tenfold, and all the stars of heaven sing for me."

V67 turned slowly about. His wife was shrinking white-faced against the base of the television screen.

"So you console yourself with a gigolo in my absence!" he cried, his lips livid with wrath.

"A gig—gig——" stammered his wife, in a frightened whisper.

V67 cursed his wife's lack of erudition. "The new male Companions are exactly like the abominable gigolos of the ancient world," he muttered fiercely. "A more despicable type of parasite never existed."

"But the Dictator of Emotion has announced that Mechanical Companions are perfectly respectable," pleaded his wife, in desperation.

V67 looked at her. His eyes were destitute of compassion. "He was speaking of the female Companions," he said. "That sort of thing is all right for a man."

"It's a strange rule that doesn't work both ways," said his wife, in a despairing tone.

Brutal and primitive passions were flooding V67 in waves. Something loathsome and aberrant in his nature surged to the surface, and for a moment he felt an impulse to strike his wife—actually to strike her—with the flat of his hand.

The impulse generated its own negation. Man is not built to cross the humanizing gulf of forty centuries and revert to the savagery of a dead world without experiencing an overwhelming reaction. No sooner had V67 experienced the detestable emotion than a great shame and horror came upon him. He sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hand.

Compassionately his wife rose and crossed to where he was sitting. Slipping to the floor beside him, she rested her blond, talc-wreathed head against his right knee.

"My poor darling," she whispered. "Do you imagine for a moment that he has taken your place in my affections? Why, he is a mere mechanical toy, an amusing diversion. Even if he does talk divinely of moonlight and roses he is, in essence, nothing but a gadget. I was lone-

ly, and horribly unhappy, and I wanted to make you jealous. But if you will give up that *creature*——"

V67 was silent for a moment. Then his hand descended, and caressed his wife's coiffure. As the flimsy adornment slipped between his fingers he said: "You are right, my sweet. Tomorrow I shall ask Supervisor of Emotion T74 to give me permission to dismantle Mechanical Companion GH8. You will doubtless be relieved when the bosom records are destroyed, and the tender, individual nuances of her face, throat and limbs cease to exist as parts of an illusionary whole."

His wife looked up at him. She thought: "He will give up Mechanical Companion GH8 for my sake, but he still loves her. He is going to dismantle her because he can not bear the thought of surrendering her to another. In his sight she will always remain as young and lovely and inaccessible as the figures on a Grecian urn. How did the ancient poet phrase it?

"She can not fade, though thou hast not thy bliss.
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.

"I shall have a *real* rival now."

There was a far-away look in V67's eyes as he continued, tenderly, to caress his wife's silver coiffure.

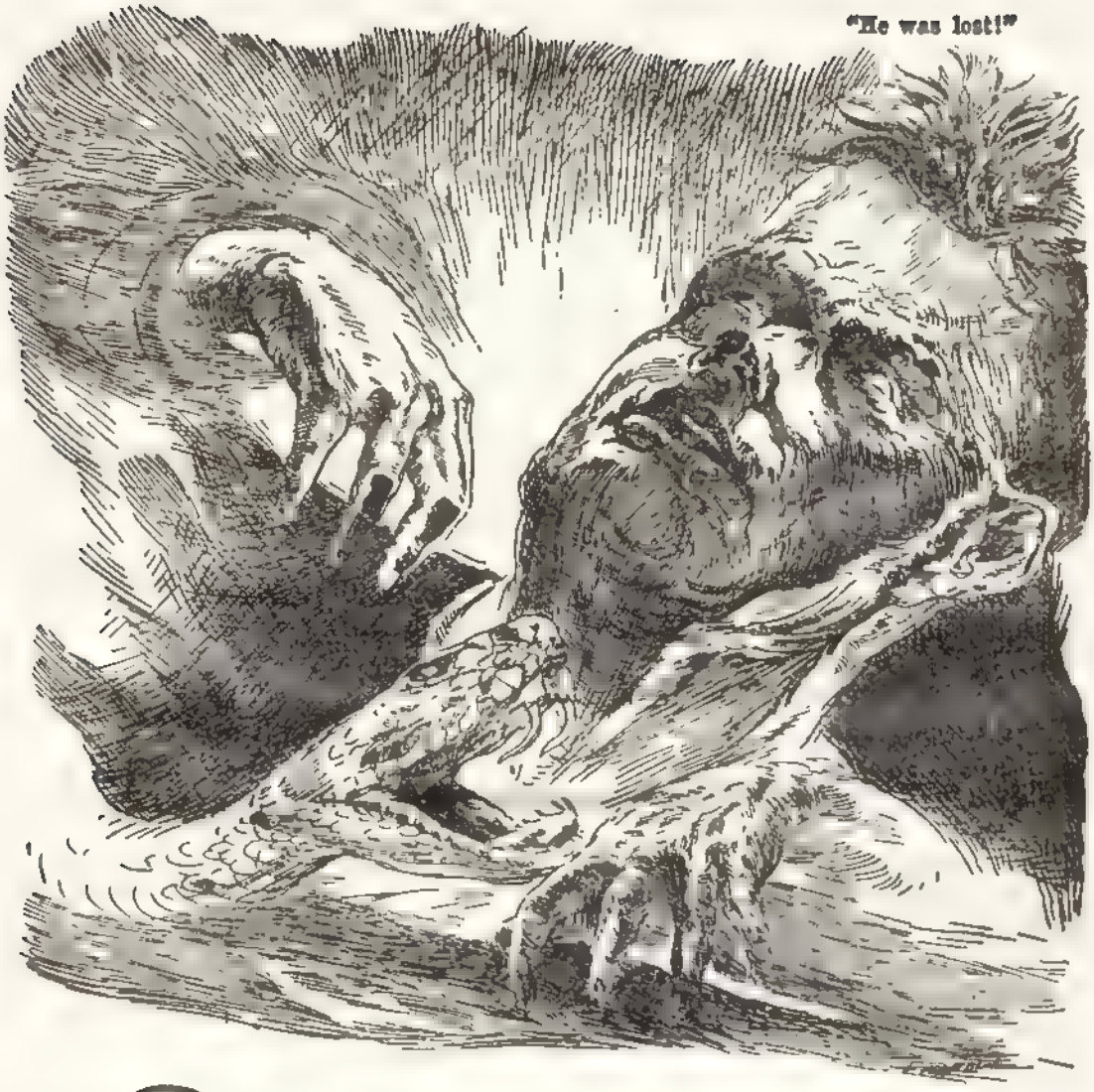
Coming Soon—

SATAN IN EXILE

By ARTHUR WILLIAM BERNAL

A stupendous weird serial novel of a space bandit whose exploits among the planets of our solar system made him a veritable Robin Hood of the airways.

This is not at all the usual type of interplanetary story, but is a glorious saga of a strange character whose heroic feats won him the nickname, Satan. Watch for this thrilling epic in WEIRD TALES.



"He was lost!"

Murder in the Grave

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A grim story of a terrible ordeal—a night of terror ten feet below the surface of the ground

WALTERS lay in his coffin ten feet under earth's surface and looked up through the square air-tube at a patch of blue sky. There appeared at the tube's upper end the face of Charlie Rusper, his manager, looking down into the electric-lit coffin.

"Everything all right, Walters?"

Walters nodded. "All okay. Does it look like much business this evening?"

Rusper's head bobbed. "Yeah, looks as if the carnival will pull good crowds in this town and we'll get our share of it. We've done better so far than any other outfit in the carnival."

"Why make it 'we'?" Walters demanded. "*I'm* the living corpse, not you. I'm the one who has to stay planted down here a week at a time to let boobs gape down at me."

But when Rusper's head was withdrawn above, Walters smiled. It was really a swell racket, he told himself. A swell racket, and an easy one. While the other carnival performers went through wearying routines night after night, all he had to do was lie down here in his comfortable, warm and roomy coffin for a week. And he made more money than any of the others.

He always felt like laughing at the ignorant saps who paid good money simply to goggle down the tube at the man buried alive. Well, as long as they wanted to do it, it was all right with him. He didn't mind taking it easy down here and getting good money for it.

Another face appeared up at the top of the tube, that of Tessa Morden, the wife of Sam Morden, who ran a wheel-concession. She smiled down the tube at him.

It gave Walters a warm, satisfied feeling to see Tessa smiling like that at him. It made him want to go to Sam Morden and tell him things about Tessa and himself, just to see the man's colorless face twist and change.

"Hello there, corpse," smiled Tessa down the tube. "I see you're buried again."

"You didn't think I was such a corpse last night," Walters said meaningly.

She laughed full-throatedly. "After a week down there, no wonder you're a wildcat when you get out."

Her tone changed suddenly. "Here comes Sam," she said. "The boob probably needs me over at the tent."

In a moment her face was replaced at the tube's top by the thin, gray face of Sam Morden. He blinked down the tube.

"We have to open up our concession, Walters," he said. "The crowd is beginning to come in."

"That's all right," said Walters equably. "Tessa was just kidding me a little."

When Morden went away, Walters laughed to himself. What would the fool say if he knew? he wondered. He could imagine the hurt, incredulous look he would assume.

The patch of blue sky at the top of the foot-square tube began to darken, and the evening rush of business began. The crowds drifting into the carnival were attracted by Rusper's stentorian barking.

Walters could faintly hear Rusper's voice. "Buried alive, ladies and gentlemen, a human, living being buried ten feet under the earth's surface. Lying down there day and night for a week with only a tube connecting him to the surface! How would *you* like to be buried ten feet beneath——"

ONE head after another appeared at the top of the tube, peering down into the lighted coffin where Walters lay looking up at them. Most of them had an expression of mingled curiosity and horror.

Walters was used to that. He felt nothing but contempt for them. Saps, that's what they were. Just for a look at him, handing over the money that he spent freely when he was on the surface, on himself and Tessa.

He lay there, now and then flexing his muscles to keep off stiffness, while the heads appeared and vanished above. The customers fell off toward eleven o'clock and at midnight the carnival closed. Then

Rusper let down a late supper for him through the tube.

When he had eaten it and the dishes had been drawn back up, he and Rusper tested as usual the button in the coffin that rang an electric bell in Rusper's tent. It was in order, and the manager bade him good-night.

Walters turned out his light and lay in the coffin in darkness. He was drowsily content, looking up through the tube at a square patch of starry sky. He didn't know that he had drifted off to sleep until he was suddenly aroused by a sound above.

He opened his eyes sleepily and saw against the bright stars at the top of the tube a man's head. The man was talking down the tube to him in a low, husky voice, and it was this that had aroused him.

"Walters, do you hear me?" the man above was calling softly down. "Are you awake?"

"Who's that—Rusper?" Walters demanded. "What the devil do you want?"

"It's not Rusper," said the soft voice. "It's Morden, Walters—it's Sam Morden."

Sam Morden? Walters felt quick irritation at being roused from his sleep by that fool.

"Why wake me up at this time of night?" he demanded.

Morden's laugh came softly down the tube. "Can't you guess why, Walters? Haven't you the slightest idea?"

A little chill shot through Walters. Had Sam Morden discovered that he and Tessa—but no, of course he couldn't have.

He made his voice angry as he answered up the tube. "Will you tell me what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about what's been going on between you and Tessa," Morden's voice whispered down. "You think I haven't known, Walters? You think I haven't seen the looks and smiles between you two, that I haven't known how the whole carnival is laughing at me?"

"You're crazy if you think there's anything between Tessa and me!" Walters said vehemently. "Why, we're just good friends, is all. Go and ask her and she'll tell you the same thing."

"No, she won't tell me so," Sam Morden said softly. "She won't ever tell anyone anything, Walters, for she's dead."

"She's what? Do you mean to say that you——" Walters, aghast, could not finish, but Morden did.

"That I killed her? Yes, I did, Walters. And I'm going to follow her myself. And so are you, Walters! That's why I came here before I went myself. You're going to die, too, tonight. But you're going to die differently from Tessa and me."

Walters was pressing furiously on the button at his left side, the button of the bell beside Rusper's cot. It would bring Rusper on the run, and if the maniac above would hold off——

The gentle voice came down the tube, as though the man was able to see down into the coffin's darkness and perceive what he was doing.

"If you're trying to ring your bell, you're wasting time. I cut the wire, Walters. That was the first thing I did."

Walters was held dumb for a moment by the icy shock of that information. Then he gave utterance to a loud yell.

"Rusper!" he yelled up the tube. "Rusper, help! Morden's trying to murder me!"

The coffin's interior rang with the reverberations of his cry until his ears hurt. "Rusper, do you hear me?"

"Rusper can't hear you," chuckled softly the shadow above. "Nobody can hear

you but me, Walters. I wouldn't yell any more if I were you. I'd lie there as quiet as I could."

"What—what are you going to do?" Walters stammered.

Morden's voice was a caressing whisper. "You're going to die, Walters, but you're not going to die quickly from a bullet like Tessa just did, or like I will when I've finished here with you. That would be too easy on you. You're going to die in a way that's slower than that, a way that will give you a lot of time to think before you go."

There was a rustle above and Walters' straining eyes made out something coming slowly down the dark tube. It looked like a cloth bag being lowered by cords, from the dark outline of it.

It was lowered until it hung in the tube just a few inches above Walters' head and shoulders. He found himself breathing now with great difficulty, as though a strap had tightened across his breast.

Morden's voice came down to him. "Do you know what's in this bag I've let down to you, Walters? It's death, the death I've decreed for you. Walters, there's a living rattlesnake in this bag. One of the snakes belonging to Barth's snake-charmer show. Yes, I stole it from Barth's tent tonight for just this purpose. In a second I'm going to pull the cord that will empty the bag, and let the snake in there with you. Yes, in there in the coffin with you! If you lie very still it may not strike you at first. But you can't lie still long, and when you move it'll strike.

"That's the death you're going to have, Walters. I'm going off to a clean, quick death myself, one I'm glad to meet. You'll envy me when you're in your death-throes down here. And here comes that death—now."

As Morden spoke the last words, Walters heard the bag rustling in movement. Instantly there was a slight hissing sound and a cold, scaly length flowed down across his chin and neck.

Walters had been frozen into a petrifaction of horror by the revelation of Morden's purpose. That petrifaction held him as the snake's cold body glided across his neck and chest.

He lay like a man frozen. In a moment the heavy length of the snake had crossed his chest and then for a brief time lay unmoving over his right arm, which was extended along his side.

He could not have moved the slightest muscle of his body, even had he desired it. He lay there as motionless as a dead man, his staring eyes turned upward to the tube as they had been just before the bag had been emptied upon him.

He could see as through a dark haze the bag being drawn up again. For a moment longer the dark head of Morden was visible against the stars up at the tube's top, apparently looking down. Then it vanished. Morden was gone. He was alone down here in the coffin with the snake.

Walters, lying utterly rigid, tried to tell himself that this was all but a nightmare, that he would wake up and laugh in relief at this horrible dream. Of course it was only a nightmare! But even as he told himself that, he felt the snake's body moving again, gliding on across his right arm and settling between it and the coffin's side.

The snake seemed moving in a circular manner now in the space between his arm and the side. It apparently was coiling up, the rustling sounds it made magnified to thunder in Walters' bursting ears. In his nostrils was the musty, bitter scent of the reptile's body.

He lay there, staring rigidly up the tube at the square of stars, striving to

seize some rational thought out of the mad race of horrors in his brain. The feel of the coiling body against his arm almost erased everything else in his brain but sheer terror, yet one thing remained clear to him.

He must not move. That was the first essential, that was life or death. The reptile had not yet been angered by his proximity, probably because it was accustomed to being handled by a human being in the snake-charmer show. But if he moved in the darkness, the snake coiled against him would sense menace and strike.

Walters lay with every muscle taut, just as when the snake first had been released in his coffin. His right arm, beside which the thing now was coiled, had been a little upraised, and despite its aching he dared not lower it now. No matter what else he did, he must make no perceptible motions.

What was he to do? He tried to concentrate calmly on the problem. He must keep cool, must not give way to the insensate horror that pounded at the portals of his brain. He must find some way of escape from this hideous death Morden had planned.

He was not thinking of Morden now at all. Neither had he any thought of Tessa. Love, hate, all other emotions had given place to the fear that clawed his vitals. No person, no thing in the world had any reality to him now, nothing but the snake coiled up here beside him in the dark coffin.

He could not lie motionless like this for ever, Walters knew. Sooner or later he would have to make a movement. So he must find a way out of this terrible dilemma before he made such a movement and the snake's fangs struck. Yet what way out was there?

What about the bell-button? Morden had said he had cut the wire, and when he had pressed it Rusper had not answered. But maybe Morden had lied about cutting it, Walters reasoned feverishly. Maybe Rusper had simply not heard it, or had been out of his tent. Or if the wire had been cut, perhaps someone had noticed and had repaired it.

Surely the bell would ring now if he pressed the button. It would bring Rusper to the tube's top, and he would call softly up the tube to Rusper and tell him of the snake. They would find a way to get him out of here and kill the snake, once they knew. Rusper would find a way.

Walters' left hand was a few inches from the bell-button. He moved it toward it. He meant the motion to be an infinitely slow one but his overstrained nerves betrayed him and his hand's first movement was a little jerk. At once he stopped, cold with increased terror. The snake had moved a little in its coils at the jerk.

He waited for minutes, unmoving. Then his hand crept slowly on. The few inches between it and the coffin's side seemed a vast distance now. At last his fingers encountered the side, crept along it to the button. He could have sobbed with relief as he pressed in the button.

He held the button in. Even now the bell must be ringing in Rusper's tent, and Rusper must be springing from his cot to answer it. Walters' brain calculated the distance between the tent and the tube. Now Rusper must have reached it, and he waited tautly for the call down the tube.

It did not come. But perhaps Rusper had stopped to dress, Walters told himself with feverish hope. That would make him a few minutes later. He waited those few minutes, his left hand still

on the button. But no head's dark outline broke the square of starlit sky above.

It might be that Rusper had been delayed—no, he had not heard the bell! It had not rung! The truth hammered home into Walters' brain, would not be denied. Morden had cut the wire as he had said, and the bell was dead. He had been merely deluding himself with hopes sprung from desperation.

There was no hope from the bell—and neither was there any hope of anyone hearing him if he shouted up the tube. One had to be directly at the tube's top to hear him, he knew. And if he did shout, the snake would surely be stirred to strike.

Perhaps someone would happen to look down the tube? That hope flickered across Walters' tortured mind and then faded, vanished. Who would come? No one ever came at night. Someone might think of him when the bodies of Tessa and Morden were found. But they'd not be found until morning.

What was he to do, then? What *could* he do, when the first movement he made would probably cause the reptile to strike then and there? It seemed to Walters that he had been lying motionless already for hours, with the snake's cold body coiled beside his arm. Time had become for him endless, immeasurable.

The desperate thought came to him that he might reach out and kill the snake with his bare hands. It would bite him as he did so, of course. But a man did not die immediately from a rattlesnake's bite, he knew. If he could escape from the coffin soon enough after he was bitten and receive treatment, he would live.

But no—it was impossible. Even though he killed the snake now, he would still be unable to attract the attention of anyone above. He would still have to lie in the coffin until morning, with the poison circulating in his body, and long before morning he would have died hideously.

Yet neither could he lie motionless here with the snake until morning. He must do something, he knew. Beyond that necessity his mind refused for the moment to function. His brain was so clouded by horror that he could not think consecutive thoughts.

Then Walters had an idea. Suppose he got his left hand a little up the tube, rapped on its side? That would surely not arouse the snake, for most of the sound would go up the tube. And such rapping should be audible to anyone above who might chance to pass near the tube's mouth.

He assured himself that it would. To his quivering brain the problem was resolved suddenly into a single difficulty—if he could but rap on the tube's side he would be heard and rescued. He began to move his left hand again, bringing it slowly up toward his face.

He moved it without a sound, bending his elbow. There was no movement from the snake beside him and Walters' hopes rose. The snake was sleeping, *must* be sleeping! He would win clear of this hell-trap yet.

He got his hand to the tube's opening, above his head. He had to bend his wrist to get his hand up the tube. It went up the tube but a few inches before the bend of his wrist stopped it. He tested and found that he could reach the tube's side with his clenched fingers.

He waited a moment, then knocked softly on the side of the tube. To Walters the sound seemed a series of deafening thunderclaps breaking the coffin's silence. There was no answering sound from above and he rapped again, more loudly.

Buzz-zz-zz! The snake's sharp, dry rattle filled the coffin's interior with the suddenness of lightning. Its coils had stiffened against Walters' arm, and he could almost see the upraised head with its gaping fangs, the stiff, erect tail vibrating.

The snake sounded its rattle again. Walters remained frozen with his hand in the tube. The sound had paralyzed him in a sheer incapability of movement. He waited in an ecstasy of dread for the rattlesnake to strike.

Then he felt a smooth, elongated mass slide down along the right side of his body on the coffin's floor. The snake, disturbed and alarmed by his rapping, was moving. Walters heard the dry sound of its gliding progress. He lay in darkness, unmoving as a corpse.

The snake's weight came suddenly upon his right ankle. It slid smoothly over the ankle, the coldness of its body perceptible through his thin sock. A moment later he felt its weight on his left leg also, below the knee.

For a moment the snake's movement stopped; it felt like a heavy rope lying across his legs. Then the thing's weight twisted up his left leg and thigh toward his waist, toward his head.

He lay in the same petrified position, his right arm against his body, his left one doubled up with its hand a few inches inside the tube-opening above him. He felt the snake glide up past his waist onto his left breast, over his light shirt.

It halted there a moment, then began a circular movement. The snake was coiling up on his left breast, Walters knew. Either its alarm had now been dissipated or it liked the greater warmth there. It completed its coiling and lay unmoving.

Walters had not expelled or inhaled air into his lungs since the snake had sounded its rattle. His lungs seemed on fire now, he could go no longer without breathing. Slowly he exhaled and as slowly breathed in fresh air, controlling his famished lungs by an infinite effort of will.

The snake coiled upon his breast did not seem disturbed by this slow breathing. He could breathe, at least, and he must do nothing else until morning. He must make no slightest movement, or the already-disturbed snake would strike. His one chance of life was to lie frozen until morning.

His life now depended directly upon his ability to stay immobile. He must not move—he must not move. It was surely possible for him to lie a few hours motionless when life itself was at stake.

It could be no more than four or five hours until morning. He was sure that at least two hours had passed since the carnival had closed and Rusper had bade him good-night. Maybe it had been more than that, maybe three hours, or even four. He might have slept for some time before Morden had awakened him.

Morning might be far nearer than he thought, Walters told himself. His dazed brain seemed unable to form clear ideas of time. It seemed to him that he had been lying here in the coffin with the snake for days, weeks, years.

His skin was creeping, crawling slightly on his body. It was as though his body was independently aware of the thing that was coiled upon it, and strove to shrink from it. His left arm ached and throbbed from its bent, raised position.

WHAT was the snake doing? Was it resting there on his breast in quiescent coils, or did it have its head erect in the darkness. If he could only see the thing, Walters thought. The horror of seeing it would be preferable to having it here in the coffin with him, on his breast, yet unable to see it.

Did the thing have its head raised, swaying slightly to and fro, the filmy eyes staring through the darkness? Its head might even at this moment be moving toward his face, forked tongue darting in and out. He felt that he could *see* that hideous head, and that it *was* swaying toward his face.

His left arm was twitching a little, a movement his brain could not control. And now Walters seemed to see through the darkness the snake aware of that movement, raising its tail, opening its mouth to bare the dreadful fangs.

It was but his imagination, he told himself desperately. He must not lose his nerve now—morning must be close at hand. But his arm continued to twitch a little, against his will, his hand vibrating slightly inside the tube.

The coils upon his breast were moving, stirring. This was not imagination—the snake was again becoming alarmed. He must not move, must not move! But the arm continued to twitch, and as though in contagion his left leg had begun to quiver also.

He could not control them. His body was passing beyond his brain's control, was moving despite the snake's warning stirrings. In a moment it would break completely from his brain's orders and would thrash wildly about. He *knew* it would—even now it was stirring more and more strongly.

He was lost! The snake's rattle was buzzing sharply and loudly in the dreadful warning. And then with a hoarse scream Walters' body arched convulsively in the coffin's darkness and he clutched madly at the snake's body as he felt the sharp fangs in his throat.

RUSPER's face and those of the men about him were masks of horror as they looked down into the coffin they had hastily unearthed, at the twisted body and dead, distorted face of Walters. The lifeless length of the big rattlesnake was still clutched convulsively in his hands.

"God, what a way to die!" Rusper whispered. "Only a jealousy-mad maniac like Morden would have killed a man in a coffin with a snake."

Barth, the snake-charmer, shook his head as he stared down at the dead reptile. "It wasn't this snake of mine killed him," he said.

Rusper and the others stared. "But he's dead—and there's the mark of the snake's fangs on his throat!"

Barth nodded. "But that bite didn't kill him—it couldn't. Every one of the snakes I use has its poison-sacs taken out before I'll work with it. Naturally I keep that fact to myself. Morden didn't know it and neither did Walters. He died down in that coffin from pure terror alone."

"He screamed incoherently as he hung head down in the vise-like grip."

Rulers of the Future

By PAUL ERNST

The story of an incredible race of monsters that rule the human race hundreds of millions of years from now

The Story Thus Far

PLANNING a trip to Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to our solar system, the astronomers Ticknor and Brock find themselves thwarted by a rival scientist, Gorse, who calls in the police to prevent what he calls certain suicide. While Brock and a newspaper reporter named Raymond Woodward hold off the police, Professor Ticknor makes his calculations and points the space-ship toward Alpha Centauri; and the three men tumble into the craft and are launched on their voyage through space.

Owing to haste in making his calculations, Ticknor aims the space-shell wrongly, and the space-travellers find that they have travelled in a huge circle and have come back to their starting-point. The voyage has taken several hundred million years; but, since they have trav-

elled with the speed of light, by which absolute time is measured, the journey seems to them as if it were instantaneous, and they have grown no older.

They find the land-surface of the globe covered with ice, for the Earth is gripped in the frozen clutch of a glacial epoch. They land in a green oasis in the ice-fields where was once the Sahara Desert.

Leaving the space-shell to explore the oasis, they are gripped by the tentacle-like tendrils of a man-eating tree with purple flowers, from which they are rescued by the people of the oasis. These are kind-hearted, primitive folk, without weapons of any kind, and with few tools. They are beset by a haunting fear of the beings who rule them, and for whom they collect great quantities of fish. These rulers collect the tribute of fish every thirty-five days, and usually take one or more of the humans with them to feed to their "god."

A number of the rulers arrive to collect the tribute, and cut the scientists off from their space-shell. They are lizard-men, resembling enormous crocodiles, walking on two legs and possessing an articulate language and brains of good intellectual capacity. The rulers take the three men with them, together with Gayta, a girl of the oasis, to feed to their "god." They first wreck the time-machine of the space-shell.

The story continues.

7

WITH the lizard-men herding us before them, we entered the village of Gayta and her people. And never have I seen such wholesale, mad fear as that which palpably bound the scores of forest folk as the lizard-men appeared among the rough bark huts.

They were all there, in a group, to receive their masters—like a group of ghosts, moving with fearful silence as though afraid a noise would anger the lizard-men, ready to spring to command like a pack of pitiful dogs.

And yet they were human; and already I had begun to wonder how best the independence and courage that goes with the human race—no matter how deeply buried—could be reached and stirred. By Gayta's account, the humans in the five-hundred-mile island in the ice greatly outnumbered the lizard-men. . . .

But the humans were unarmed. Centuries of slave-like oppression had untaught them all knowledge of arms. Even the bow and arrow seemed unknown to them. Unarmed, no ten of them were a match for one of the lizard-men, scale-armored and powerful-limbed as they were.

My eyes, seeking eagerly over the white-faced group, saw a blue wood-flower twined in platinum gold hair over the shoulders of the men in the front ranks. Gayta.

She caught my eye, and squeezed to the front. "Wodewah," she called—the nearest she could come to pronouncing my name.

The development from that call was instantaneous. Arrogantly the monstrous leader of the lizard-men said something in his croaking tongue. Shuddering but submissive, Gayta came forward.

There started a conversation between them. Gayta laboriously described, in the difficult, croaking language of the things, how we had come here; her arms, waving to the heavens and then toward the ruined space-ship, told us that.

The lizard-men stared at us, nodding their crocodile heads as though her words but confirmed their own guesses as to our appearance there.

The leader croaked out a brief sentence

—and I saw Gayta's face seem to freeze while she glanced with dilated eyes at Brock and Ticknor and me.

Then the lizard-men, with croaking, impatient commands, started the enslaved humans at the task of gathering up the stores of fish they had accumulated for them.

The humans sprang to obey, shivering when one of the monsters came too near, hurrying into the big bark storehouses in which the food was kept. Now and then one of the lizard-men would dart out a huge clawed hand to cuff a human he thought too slow. And in the pale, inhuman eyes was plainly to be read a vast contempt for the puny human things that scurried to their will.

The terror in the faces of the forest folk increased, if that were possible. I thought of Gayta's words: That now and then—when, no man could know in advance—the things took one of their number to sacrifice to their god. I wondered too, sick with suspense as time went on.

The cured fish was finally all gathered in a great pile before the lizard-men. Without waiting for command, the stronger humans began packing crude baskets with the fish, and swinging them pack-like on their backs.

The leader of the lizard-men swung toward us. A croaked order came from his fleshless, reptilian lips. Easy enough to guess its meaning!

The three of us looked at one another. I saw Brock's eyes blaze with a hardly repressed madness of rage. But:

"Hell! There's nothing to do but obey," he muttered at last. "If we don't we'll die—and we might as well live as long as we can on the chance——" He stopped.

Chance? Chance of what? With the space-shell and all its contents demolished——

But the instinct of life, even when there seems to be no purpose for living in view, *is* a strong one. Gritting our teeth, we packed baskets of fish and slung them to our shoulders.

Still there had been no move to pick a victim of sacrifice. With the forest folk that had befriended us, we felt a dawning hope. . . .

And then the leader glared with his pale, cold eyes at Gayta, and croaked out a single syllable.

She stepped forward and joined us, taking her place beside me.

"Gayta!" I cried. "They're not choosing—you?"

"For sacrifice? No," she said. "I am to go along because I can talk both to you and to—them. I am one of few who can understand them even a little. It is not for the human to be able to say much in the language of those that are not human." And then, slowly, "No, it is not I who am to be sacrificed."

I DREW in a quick, hissing breath as the meaning of her words, and of her stricken and pitying expression, came home to me. And I saw that Ticknor and Brock, though their knowledge of Gayta's tongue was not as full as mine, had understood too.

Then the lizard-men set off through the forests in a line that we knew led to the center of the oasis—to the gathering of great green mounds that were their dwelling-places. Again without command, knowing what was expected of them, the porters—and we three with the hated loads on our backs—followed with their burdens.

Beside me, graceful as a wild forest creature and from time to time stealthily trying to ease some of the load of my pack by slipping her lovely shoulders under it, walked Gayta.

"So we are to be sacrificed to their god," I said at last. "And their god is not in the sky, as most men's gods are, but is a thing alive and dwelling in their city with them."

"Yes," said Gayta, nodding to both questions.

"Can you tell me what it is like?"

Well, she tried. But again there was the bar of language, the difficulty of trying to describe to an alien something that could not be definitely pointed out or likened to something else. All I could get from her words was that the god was huge, all-seeing and all-knowing, and very, very old.

"But it is alive?" I persisted, still thinking this god of the lizard-men might be a lump of stone or some savage idol.

"It lives and moves," she said definitely. And, "It—it eats the sacrifices," she added, almost inaudibly.

"That's a pleasant thought," growled Brock, who had been intently listening in.

"Well," said Ticknor, indomitable little man, "it isn't every one who can boast of living for several hundred million years—then to be eaten by a form of life totally undreamed of by the scientists of their own age."

Silence followed this, while we trudged in a long line through the forest.

"If you are sacrificed, I will be, too," said Gayta suddenly.

"Eh?"

For the moment I had been back in Capetown, Africa, in the year 1990—just a red-headed cub of a newspaper reporter giroing here and there in a stupid and monotonous round of news-gathering. Like Brock, I had wanted adventure. Well, I'd gotten it!

"If you are sacrificed, I will be too," my lovely lady with the blue bloom in her hair repeated. "Where you go, I will go."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" I told her in essence, with a lump growing in my throat. "You'll go back to your people and live as happily as you can. And stop trying to carry half my load!"

For weary hours we went on, the lizard-men stalking untiringly before us. Night came; I thought we would stop and camp, but we didn't.

Straight through we pushed; and dawn showed pearl-gray in the east before we had arrived at the lizard-men's capital.

The weird marvel of that city!

There were less than a hundred buildings in it, but each was immense—a round domed hall fully three stories high and a hundred feet in diameter. They were built of great blocks of stone, carefully squared and held together with a curious, reddish cement. Finely rounded pillars held up the domes; and the interiors, as we were soon to find out, were unpartitioned into rooms and were lighted dimly by narrow slots in the stone walls that took the place of windows.

From every side long lines of exhausted humans, similar to our own band of porters, struggled in with great quantities of fish. It seemed incredible that the lizard-men could consume so much, even remembering that they fed only one week out of every five.

"Some of the food is for their god," said Gayta, when I questioned her.

Before each domed building the miserable humans were dropping their baskets of fish. And from each entrance stumped lizard-men to catch up the scaled food on which they existed, and carry it into the interiors of their homes.

I suppose, then, the burden-bearers were allowed to go home. But I don't know, because just then the band of lizard-men that had captured us threw us into an empty dome building, leaving

three of their number to take guard posts, like fantastic stone images, before the door.

Gayta struggled wildly to come in, too; and after a moment the leader contemptuously allowed her to do so. It was evident that the lizard-men had come, through the centuries, to have a pretty low opinion of humans; for not once had we seen one of the dread beings hesitate to turn its back to a whole group of slaves; and now we saw that the three set to guard us seldom glanced at us and took their duties very lightly indeed.

"If we were only armed," groaned Brock. "With a gun apiece and plenty of bullets we could wipe out of existence the whole crew of things that make this oasis a hell."

"But we have only one gun—and one bullet," said Ticknor. "And now, more than ever, we must conserve that one bullet."

Brock and I nodded. No words were necessary. All three of us were thinking of the same thing: the "god" of the lizard-men to which we were going to be fed.

"Gayta," I said, struck by a sudden thought, "if this god of the lizard-men were destroyed, would your people and the other humans in the land have courage to rise up and fight their masters?"

She pondered the thought a long time. Finally she nodded. "I believe they would. Strong as the terror is that binds us to the lizard-men, the fear of their god is stronger; for as I have said, the god can read men's minds, and when one dares think of fighting, that one is at once caught and sacrificed."

I was doubtful about this mind-reading stuff. It was more probable that in each forest village one or two craven souls acted as spies to the lizard-men, who took their betrayals of their own people and attributed them to the all-knowing power of their god. But it seemed pointless to argue along that line with the girl.

"If their god died," Gayta went on, in a subdued voice and glancing ever over her shoulder as though afraid of being struck dead on the spot, "and if we could find weapons, I believe it would be possible to band the humans all together against these things."

"You hear that?" I said excitedly to Brock.

"Yes, I heard, but what of it?" was his moody reply.

"But don't you see? With our one bullet we might be able to kill whatever creature it is the lizard-men worship, and——"

"And then be torn to pieces in the next few seconds for what we had done," he finished for me.

"But we might escape after we'd killed it—and then organize the rest of the humans for war!"

"We have no arms," said Gayta, either intuitively guessing at the meaning of my words in English, or repeating a regret that had festered for years in the minds of all the humans here.

"They could be made," I said, speaking in her tongue. "Long wood spears, like this"—I drew a picture in the dank filth of the floor—"with the points hardened in fire. It might be done."

"*If* we can kill the god, and *if* we can get away alive afterward, and *if* these people have the fire of courage still flickering somewhere within them—which I seriously doubt," said Brock, in English.

"There's no law against hoping, is there?"

"No," he said, "there's no law against hoping. Now let's stop chattering and get some sleep. I'm tired to the bone."

Calmly, he lay down in the driest spot on the damp floor he could find, and

closed his eyes. And in a few moments the rest of us followed suit. That long trudge overland under our heavy burdens had so exhausted us that even the desperate hopelessness of our situation could not keep us awake.

WE SLEPT the clock around, as the rays of another dawn coming in the entrance told us. And then it was time to compose ourselves for whatever ordeal faced us.

Cramped and cold from our long sleep on the hard damp floor, we got up and went to the entrance. A group of humans straggled past as we reached the doorway. Gayta called to them.

"They are the last burden-bearers, from the farthest part of the land," she said to us. "All the tribute is here, and the things will start their feasting and worshipping today."

"And that lasts for five days?" I said.

"Yes."

"And then for thirty days they sleep?"

"It is not exactly sleep. They lie still, eyes open, and move very slowly if they have to move at all. I have seen them."

"Couldn't they be overpowered then, very easily?"

"Without weapons of any sort?" countered Gayta, shrugging her slim shoulders.

"There are your weapons," I said, pointing to the drawing of a spear I had outlined on the floor. "Now listen, and listen well:

"The instant you are through with your interpreting duties here and are free to go—travel at once to every village in the land and teach the men how to make these fire-hardened spears. Tell them to gather together at some central spot you can name, and march on the city here on the fifth day after these monsters have finished their feasting and are sunk in lethargy. They can then be killed, and the land delivered."

Brock caught my arm and squeezed it, though his face expressed little optimism. "Good man," he said. "Nothing can save us, in my opinion, but we'll have done something if we can whip these brother humans into action."

But Gayta was shaking her head. "It would be useless to try to talk to them," she said. "All are too afraid of the god."

"Tell them the god is dead!" I said, setting my jaw tight; "for, Gayta, it will be—soon after we are given it as sacrifice victims."

"A little confident, aren't you?" said Ticknor in our own language. "What makes you so sure we can kill it?"

"We have a trinitele bullet, haven't we? And that will blow to pieces any animal living."

"It will blow to pieces anything living *that we know about,*" corrected Ticknor. "Don't forget, we haven't the faintest idea what form of life this god is. For all we know it may be proof even against trinitele bullets."

Gayta was shaking my arm, her eyes wide as she considered the possibility that the lizard-men's god might not be deathless after all.

"Wodewah, what are you saying to your friend?"

"I was telling him how we could kill the god," I translated, with a warning glance at Ticknor. "Yes, Gayta, when you go away, leaving us to be sacrificed——"

"I have said I would be sacrificed by your side, Wodewah."

"But you would not betray your people if there were a chance of delivering them?"

The answer was long in coming. But at last she shook her head.

"Then do as I say. The instant the

lizard-men are through with you, go to all your people everywhere and proclaim the god to be dead. It will be true," I said, more confidently than I felt. "Then can they make the spears and do battle. You understand?"

"I understand," she said, her dark eyes beginning to glow. "And I shall do it."

The three lizard-men at the entrance croaked out something. An instant later we heard the sliding foot-falls of a number of them. They entered.

They had come to take us away.

8

In the growing gold of early morning the four of us—Gayta, Ticknor, Brock and I—stumbled over the uneven stone lanes leading between the great mound buildings toward the center of the ghostly city.

Around us crowded the gigantic lizard-men, glaring at us with more emotion expressed in their cold eyes than we had seen there before. We were half suffocated by their dank stench. We could see the slow, crawling pulse throb in their frog throats. Evidently the forthcoming religious festival, in which we were to be the star performers, roused all the excitement ever capable of being stirred in their sluggish natures.

We soon saw that the enormous dome buildings were dominated in the center of the city by a similar structure at least half again as high as the rest. And it was toward this great building we were roughly pushed.

"It is the home of their highest one," whispered Gayta to me.

I nodded. The "highest one" might mean king, or it might mean high priest. Which term was correct didn't matter: we were being taken to the palace of the ruler of all the repulsive crocodile-men, which was all we needed to know.

And now crowds of the lizard-things began to stump toward this great building, stringing out into the space before it from every side. And their movements were almost convulsively quick and nervous, as are the movements of a snake that has not fed for a long time and is seeking a place to coil in wait for prey.

All glared at us with their pale, gruesome eyes; and in a smothering mob of them we were jostled through the high entrance-way and into the interior of the palace building.

In the roof of this building was left open a circular hole. Moss—which covered all the building domes and gave them their green appearance from the air—had straggled into the skylight opening and far down the inside walls, tingeing the incoming light with a greenish hue and giving the lizard-men an even more appalling appearance than usual.

In the center of the building was a great, smooth block of stone, and standing on this was the one I judged must be the ruler.

A monster even of his monstrous kind, he stood there like a carven pillar, twelve feet or more high, watching the incoming tide of his ghastly people with pale, unblinking stare.

We were dragged before this block, and left there. The inpouring crowds took places in rings around us; and soon no more came in the entrance. All, it seemed, had convened in the palace and waited to hear our fate.

In silence they stood around us (I never saw one of the lizard-men in any but a standing posture, save for the time of their lethargy after feasting, when they lay at full length like logs upon the ground). And when all were watching tensely, with no small sound to break the grim quiet, the saurian jaws of the ruler opened.

He croaked a few words to the girl by my side. Pale as death, Gayta stepped forward.

A full sentence came from the ruler's fleshless lips, accompanied by gestures of the long powerful arms; and at length Gayta turned to me with a helpless expression.

"He wants to know more about how you came here," she said. "He has been told, from the sky. But he wants to know —how from the sky? Do you live in the sky? Or do you come from another world like this? Or did you journey here simply from another land in the ice like ours on the other side of this world?"

I was about to tell Gayta to relay the equivalent of "Go to the devil." But Ticknor shook his head.

"Tell the beast—if you can," he said wearily. "There's nothing to gain by antagonizing him needlessly."

So there commenced a difficult quarter-hour in which I tried to explain how it was we were here. Gayta herself seemed hardly to grasp it; the abstraction of our journey through the millions upon millions of years was almost too much for her. Whether the ruler comprehended—whether indeed he even knew there was a universe to go around—we will never know. But at last he seemed satisfied and asked Gayta no more questions.

There was a silence, in which his dull, cold eyes bored down at us.

"Ask him," said Brock at last, taking the bull by the horns, "what he means to do with us? No . . . wait a minute. We might as well go whole hog. Tell him we've answered his questions civilly, and reported to him here, and that now we want to go free. We demand our freedom, in fact. Go on, tell him."

GAYTA gasped at the rashness of the words. But she passed them on, slowly forming the croaking, difficult syllables of the lizard-men's language with her soft red lips.

The opalescent, greenish glare of rage came into the cold eyes. The sharp-toothed jaws snapped shut. And then, after a moment, I'll swear a sneer came over that unhuman face which certainly had no muscles with which to sneer or smile or frown or achieve any other human expression.

Contemptuous croaks dripped from the fleshless lips. And at their conclusion, Gayta turned trembling toward us.

"He says you may have your freedom if their god wills it. But before the god would will such a thing—it would have to be dead."

Brock's hand strayed a fraction of an inch toward the gun in his pocket.

"Then tell him," he said, his voice ringing out, "that their god shall die—if we are denied our freedom. For if we are thrown to it as sacrifices, as I understand is their purpose, we shall certainly destroy it."

And then what a harsh, croaking roar went up to the high domed roof from the crowds of lizard-men as Gayta translated! Blasphemy against their god! Speaking impiously of destroying it!

I thought for an instant we should be torn to pieces then and there. But a grunted command from the ruler quieted the crowd. The monster glared down at us craftily, and the claw-tipped fingers of one hand went up to pluck at the scaly jowls for all the world in the manner of a human contemplating a grim joke.

At last his voice rasped out again. And Gayta's face was a study in conflicting emotions as she gave us the message.

"He says all right, you can go free if you kill the god. But, oh . . . I am afraid. You are sure you can?"

"I am sure," I said steadily.

Now I have often wondered what

prompted the reptilian ruler to make his next appalling move. Did the lizard-men understand more of Gayta's language than they pretended? Or did they search us as an after-thought? At any rate, search us they did!

At a croaked order from the ruler, two of the nearest lizard-men stumped to my side. One held me while the other passed cold, clammy hands over my clothes, stopping to investigate every object it could feel through the cloth. My watch was drawn out, the keys and coins in my pockets, everything—and all were subjected to the gaze of the ruler.

"My God," said Brock, his face ghastly. "The gun!"

Exactly. The gun. Everything had been taken from my pockets and given to the ruler. It was now the turn of Ticknor and Brock. And if that gun were taken from us—our last hope——

Sweat poured out on Brock's face as the lizard-men stepped to his side taking from Ticknor everything he had in his clothes.

Breathlessly Ticknor and I watched.

The searching process went methodically on. The clawed hands dipped into pocket after pocket, ripping through to those inner ones where objects could be felt but the pocket-openings not found at once. Each thing taken was placed before the ruler, who examined it with a puzzled thoughtful glint in his icy eyes.

And then Brock began to struggle like a madman in his captors' grip as the hands of one of them at last came in contact with the gun. So desperately did he struggle to get at the weapon and kill at least one of the things—now that the gun was about to be taken away anyhow—that he almost wrenched free. But in an instant the unequal fight was over.

The two held him, panting furiously, and inexorable fingers took out the gun. It was given to the monster on the stone block. He felt the metal barrel, looked down the muzzle and then placed it against one of his pits of nostrils to smell it. If only the clawed, unaccustomed fingers had thrown the safety catch and the gun had gone off!

But it didn't. And in a moment the gun was tossed carelessly into the pile of our other possessions at the ruler's feet.

We could only stare at it. Thing of squat metal, with the one enormously powerful trinitele bullet in its barrel, it had been our ace in the hole. With it we had had at least a chance of overcoming whatever infernal thing it was they called god. But now——

Harsh croakings came again from the lips of the saurian ruler. And again I could swear there was a sneer on the horrible face.

"Now you are to be thrown into the pit with our god, as sacrifices to his wrath. If you are strong enough to overthrow our god, you can go free—to become as the other slaves that live in the forests but to do our bidding."

Such, in effect, was the decree translated to us by Gayta. And she added: "Oh . . . I am afraid. You are *sure* you can destroy the god?"

"We are sure," I said once more. She had not caught the significance of that search, and the seizure of the gun; why blast her hopes by explaining? My words were now a lie. But if it were a lie that could free the forest folk—if, firmly believing the terrifying god to be dead, they rose and destroyed their reptilian masters—certainly it would be a lie justified.

"What will you do now?" I asked. "Are you free to go, now that the decree has been passed upon us and your duties as translater are done?"

She nodded. Her hand had caught

mine for a moment in farewell, and in hope. The lizard-men made no move to tear us apart, simply watching us unblinkingly.

"Then act as I have told you," I concluded. "You remember all?"

Again she nodded. Her lips parted as she tried to say something, but no words came out. With a sob, she pressed my hand in her hand, then turned and went out of the great hall, the lizard-men allowing her to leave without a sign.

Now the great ruler addressed his hideous people for a few moments. In conclusion there was a chorus of eager croaks, and the lizard-men began to stream out the door like a pack of hounds loosed for the hunt. When all had gone save the three who seemed to have been told off to guard us, and the ruler himself, that worthy one issued another command.

The three seized us and began to drag us toward the door. And now occurred a thing that for a moment I could not understand.

All along, Ticknor had been the quietest and seemingly the most resigned of the three of us. But now, so suddenly that he actually caught the quick-moving lizard-men off guard for a moment, he began to writhe and struggle like a maniac in the grip of our captors.

The clutching, clawed hand of one of them tore along Ticknor's forearm as he bounded free; but the little man eluded it.

With a berserk bellow of rage, he bounded back through the room to the shoulder-high stone block on which still stood the ruler. And there he actually tried to climb the block and attack the twelve-foot monstrosity bare-handed!

"He's gone mad," said Brock, gazing at me. I nodded.

Still Ticknor scrabbled to scale the big block and get at the ruler, who stood in contemptuous movelessness glaring down at him. Then the guard detailed to the little scientist reached him, and plucked him bodily into the air and away from the block. Ticknor raged and yelled, but finally subsided in the powerful, icy grip of those great long arms.

As easily as I would carry a loaf of bread, the lizard-man carried Ticknor toward us; and once more we started out the entrance.

Then a sharp croak cracked out from the ruler. Instantly the guards stopped; and the one over Ticknor flung him to the ground.

We fought to get at him and help; but in a moment the guard's hands had gone over the little scientist's person and raised aloft bearing the gun! Ticknor's mad move had been only a clever ruse—a bit of acting designed to let him palm the gun at the ruler's feet and slip it into his pocket. But the pale, cold eyes had noticed the loss, and the ruse had failed.

The lizard-men dragged us back through the stone-paved lanes to the mound building that had been our prison before, and shoved us inside. But on the way we had seen, in every dark entrance and even out in the open places, the dread lizard-men tearing and gulping down vast piles of the fish.

Their monthly feasting had started. The sacrifice would come soon. Silently we composed ourselves to wait for it.

9

Four long, miserable days dragged themselves by after that sentence had been pronounced on us by the ruler of the lizard-men. Several times the three that guarded us tossed us in some of the crudely cured fish they themselves were

feasting on; and twice they brought us a big jar of water. Otherwise we thirsted and starved apparently unnoticed.

We talked of many things—the rambling, strained talk of men about to die—talk that need not be recorded here. Only one thing I'll mention, because at the time I thought it was such a brilliant idea—even though it came too late.

"The space-shell!" I exclaimed suddenly to Ticknor on the morning of the fifth day. "You need material to build us a time-machine. Why not get it from the space-shell? There's plenty of metal in that: steel, manalumin*, bronze, even zinc in the batteries!"

Ticknor smiled tolerantly. "Don't you think I thought of that, too? There's plenty of metal—but my main need is for a special alloy of my own formula that I've named Ticknite. All the ingredients of that formula are not to be found in the wreckage of the shell."

"What's the Ticknite like? And what's it for?"

"It is a brittle, hard alloy with the strength of steel, but non-conductive. A metal, and yet an insulator. As for what it does"—Ticknor smiled again—"I don't think you want to pass your last hours listening to a dissertation on the relationship of time to electricity, and the various functions of the materials required to build a time-machine."

"Brittle, hard, with the strength of steel, and a non-conductor," I repeated. Then: "I don't know a thing about your machine, of course. But I'm wondering if glass wouldn't serve your purpose. There's all the glass of the cabin windows left, you know."

Ticknor's head went up quickly. "Out of the mouths of babes," he said softly. "Woodward, you shame me. I hadn't thought of that. And yet—it may be that glass would do the trick——"

"What if it would?" rumbled Brock, stretching his great arms. "We won't have a chance to find out."

"You're never dead—till you're dead," observed Ticknor in reply.

Both of us glanced curiously at him. There had been an odd note in his voice, almost a note of hope. . . .

And then, with the sun about three hours high in the heavens, the three lizard-men at the entrance stumped in. Coldly, taking no chances of any attempted struggles, they grabbed each of us by the arm, their steely scaled hands clamping over our flesh like metal bands.

We were half dragged, half led from the domed building that had been our four-day prison. But when we had emerged from it into the street, we were roughly propelled in a direction we hadn't taken before: away from the center of town.

"Do you suppose the time has come for us to be introduced to their god?" I ventured.

"I think it has," said Brock. "This starts the last day of their five-day feasting. They're probably going to begin it with the edifying spectacle of our sacrifice." And then, with unconquerable courage: "You had better offer up a little prayer that the lizard-men's god doesn't like red-headed men, Woodward."

I tried to keep up my end. "It probably prefers plumpness, like Professor Ticknor's."

Ticknor managed a grin, and we went on, stumbling now and then as the lizard-men dragged us ever more swiftly forward.

Now the rest of the citizens of this dread, moss-covered city began to come streaming from all directions to surround us with excited croakings. And we saw

*Evidently an extra-light aluminum alloy; not known to our own science.

they were greatly different than they had been when we first laid eyes on them.

After their four days of feasting, they were sluggish and distended like snakes that have just swallowed prey almost as big as they themselves are. Their paunches were swelled with the great quantities of fish they had gorged themselves on. Their cold dull eyes were duller yet with the stupefaction of too much food; and it was plain to be seen that had they put off our sacrifice one day longer, many of them would have been unable to drag themselves to see the sight.

"They're certainly at the lowest ebb of their powers," Brock summed it up. "If we ever got loose from them now—I don't believe they could move fast enough to catch us again!"

But of course getting loose from them was out of the question. We were surrounded, hedged in, by rank on rank of the towering things.

At last, heading a large band of the creatures, the ruler himself appeared, paunch so swelled that he had to be half supported by two followers. With all his slow-moving, sluggish train around him, he waddled down the narrow way ahead of us.

We came to a place where the ground fell away beneath our feet in a straight cliff, to rise again in a cliff as sheer about fifty yards away, forming a pit fully forty feet deep, as straight-sided and rocky as an abandoned quarry. Taking up all the bottom of it save for a thirty-foot ledge along the near side of it was a pond of dark, opaque water, looking to be fathoms deep. And the surface of this pool heaved now and then as though with vast, deep-sunken life.

The crowding lizard-men began to croak in an almost rhythmic chant, while the excitement grew among them. The ruler waved his powerful long arms, and pointed toward the pool. He seemed to be invoking something in it—calling on some creature or spirit, in tones now commanding and now supplicating. And as he called, so, a moment later, echoing his every intonation, called the hideous mob of lizard-men.

He stopped, and stepped away from the brink of the pit. Two lizard-men took his place, bearing a great bundle of fish wrapped in a coarse net. They swung this between them—once, twice—with the second swing shooting it out over the thirty-foot ledge and squarely into the pool.

At the splash, a titanic convulsion took place in the depths of the pond. It boiled and heaved until the water overflowed the ledge in great waves.

Then *something*—a grayish, almost transparent mass like a tremendous arm—whipped up from the water, cupped over the slowly sinking netful of fish, and withdrew it beneath the surface. The boiling and heaving gradually died down, until the pond was mirror-smooth again.

I drew a deep breath. Such, in part at least, was his highness, the god. (No telling how much more of him there was than that great, grayish tentacle.) And we were about to be lowered—or thrown bodily—into the pool with it.

And now there fell a silence so intense that it hurt the ears; while all gazed at us with their dull, reptilian eyes; and the three that held us gripped our arms till they grew dead and numb. Our own moment, that silence told us, was at hand.

I took a last look around—at the serene blue vault of sky above us, at the repulsive monsters with their long clashing jaws and their swollen bellies, at the smooth black pool forty feet below us that appeared like an enormous square piece of jet in the sunlight. I drew a

breath, savoring greedily the thin pure air. . . .

The ruler himself stumped to where we were standing on the brink of the pit. His great, icy-cold hand caught my free arm. With the guard he swung, lifting me off my feet.

I writhed and kicked in thin air between the two gigantic forms. They swung me back—forward—back—and suddenly let go. . . .

I shot downward in a long arc, saw the hard black surface of the pool rush to meet me. . . .

I lit flat, and was up on the surface again after a rushing submersion in a few seconds. The breath was knocked out of me, and I was near unconsciousness; but I had wit enough left to strike out desperately for the ledge.

Before my haunted eyes swam pictures of that enormous grayish tentacle whipping up from the depths. I could fairly feel its slimy length poising over me to coil and drag me down.

But I reached the ledge, and clambered up—still untouched by whatever nameless monstrosity haunted the black waters.

Just as I was climbing onto the roughly flat rock terrace, I heard another splash and looked back to see Brock's white face emerging from the water. An instant later, Ticknor followed.

With their eyes horror-haunted by the same dread visions I had had, they splashed for the ledge. And I—I held my breath, expecting at any instant to see either or both drawn screaming under the jetty surface.

But both made their goal. The monstrous god of the lizard-men—whether still engaged in swallowing the great net of fish, or simply sullenly incurious for the moment concerning what things had fallen into its watery home—lurked down at the bottom and let them gain dry land.

However, we knew our seizure was only delayed a bit. On that thirty-foot ledge, with each end cut off by the rising cliff of the pit, and with the water of the pool on one side and the stone wall towering sheer behind us, we were as surely trapped as we had been in the pool.

INVOLUNTARILY the three of us crowded together, our backs pressed to the wall while we stared with starting eyes at the pond. And I know that I, for one, squeezed back against the rock as though hoping I could force my body into it.

Then Ticknor fumbled swiftly in his pocket, drew out a tiny object, and began anxiously to try to dry it on his dripping coat sleeve. And as Brock and I saw what it was—we understood the faint ray of hope we had seen in his eyes just before we had been led away to this place of terror.

"By heaven!" breathed Brock, his gaze riveted to that tiny object. "How did you manage——"

"I slid it out of the gun just before they took it away from me in their temple," said Ticknor. "They got the gun—but not before I'd got the charge it carried!"

The trinitele bullet! A thing no larger than a pea, but carrying in its thin steel jacket enough explosive — if properly detonated—to blow a house to pieces. If properly detonated! There lay the catch.

"How can you use it without the gun?" said Brock.

Ticknor shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps if we throw it hard enough at the—the thing in the pool the impact will explode it. Perhaps it won't. Anyhow, it's a chance. I didn't dare say anything to you before for fear the lizard-men would catch on that something was up and search us again. . . ."

His voice faltered, and stopped. He had been staring tensely at the pool as he spoke; and now we saw his gaze suddenly chained there by something he saw. Brock and I followed the direction of his stare —and I felt Brock's big hand clamp over my shoulder in a crushing grip.

The thing in the pool, inactive for these few seconds, had begun to move again, and was coming at last to see what had disturbed the placid surface of his den.

The sluggish black water was heaving and boiling with vast movement in its depths. Ripples appeared, to grow to foot-high waves that swept around our ankles as they washed over the low ledge we stood on.

Something like a twenty-foot, thick gray serpent coiled up suddenly from underneath the black surface. It weaved hungrily, blindly about, then slowly sank back again.

The heaving grew more violent. We had a horrible glimpse of an enormous, globular something, like a misshapen balloon. It rose sideways from the water, so that the ten-foot curved beak in its center showed only half its blunt width.

Over the ridge of the hideous beak one great eye peered directly at us. For several seconds the thing stayed like that, the eye—a dead, expressionless, coldly ferocious disk above the parrot-beak—focussed on us, its prey.

Then the gigantic mass sank again; but the boiling commotion of the black surface told that just underneath it the monster was propelling itself, vast and unhurried, toward our ledge.

The crowding lizard-men, peering down over the rim of the pit forty feet above us, commenced a deafening croaking chorus. Their god had seen the victims offered, and had decided to accept them.

10

FROZEN to the spot—Ticknor's hand was still outstretched toward Brock in its gesture of giving the big man the explosive bullet—we followed the trail of the great, unseen thing that swam just beneath the surface toward us.

We saw the rippling stop at the spot where our ledge met the water and dropped straight down to the unknown depths of the pool.

We saw the great, tapering, grayish tentacle thrust up again, Like a blind snake it slithered over the ledge and toward us. We raced silently away from the spot, bringing up against the cliff side that walled the far end of the ledge, then turned to look again.

The questing tentacle felt along the rock like a mighty finger. Another tentacle followed, as the first felt nothing but the hard stone; and then a third. How long they were we could not guess. But they spanned the thirty-foot ledge from water's edge to cliff—and still we saw no end to them, no jointure to a parent mass.

The awful arms coiled and uncoiled, snapping viciously as they still failed to find us. Two more tentacles slid from the water and lay like two-foot hawsers of gristle on the flat rock of the ledge.

The five tentacles bunched themselves, clung to the smooth stone. The commotion at the edge of the ledge increased colossally. There was the sound of a small cataract—and suddenly we were beholding the giant of the pool in all its hideousness.

Up from the water beside the ledge loomed a sac, grayish, glistening in the sun with a leprous and oily sheen, fully twenty feet in diameter. A horny bill yawned wide in our direction, showing a five-foot orifice of a mouth that was lined

hideously with grayish white membrane. And over that bill showed the great, unblinking, dead-looking eyes.

The tentacles convulsed with movement—and the enormous sac-like body began sliding onto the ledge. It squatted a moment on the edge of the terrace. At least three more of the immense tentacles —we could not see all the creature even yet—trailed over the edge and down into the pool. The other five began to slither heavily along the rock platform toward us.

"God!" whispered Ticknor. "What *is* the thing?"

The answer to that question? I do not know. It looked like a devil-fish—a giant of its type—more than anything else. The parrot-beak, the dead, staring eyes, the appalling tentacles. . . .

But this was a fresh-water pool, far away from any sea; and the devil-fish we knew about were salt-water things.

How did it get there in that remote, small pool; and for how many centuries had it been growing there, like a noisome, pallid water-plant, fed and worshipped by the equally hideous though smaller monsters that now watched us from above?

That is a mystery. It's anybody's guess.

Whatever it was, it was a thing out of a delirium; and like figures in a horrible nightmare, we stood at bay and watched those tremendous tentacles grope in our direction.

Nearer and nearer they came, the huge sac of a body hunching itself clumsily along the rim of the pool toward us.

There was no escape—no racing frantically from one end of the ledge to the other in order to avoid till the last possible moment the crushing embrace of the tentacles: they spanned the ledge and, looping and coiling as they did, made any attempt to hurdle them useless.

The nearest nightmare arm curled out to within twenty feet of us.

"The bullet!" gasped Brock. "Throw it . . . for God's sake!"

Ticknor started. I believe for the moment he had been hypnotized to inaction as a bird is said to be hypnotized by a snake. Those dead, huge eyes, wells of cold hate, boring into our own eyes. . . .

"Throw it!" screamed Brock, as the tentacle crawled yet nearer. "Hit its beak!"

Its beak! That hard, unyielding part of it—the only part hard enough to possibly explode our bullet!

Ticknor's arm went back, with his thumb and forefinger holding that heartbreakingly uncertain little trinitele bomb of ours. He threw. . . .

Brock and I groaned aloud. The deadly little pellet had missed the horny beak. It had missed because in the moment of Ticknor's throwing, the great beak had yawned open. The bullet had shot squarely into the gaping mouth to pass harmlessly into the soft, seething cauldron of corrosive digestive juices that was its stomach.

I am quite sure the monster was not aware of the impact of the bullet against the whitish lining of its mouth. Surely the light sting of its touch could not have registered in the tiny, sluggish brain of the thing.

At any rate it didn't act as though it had felt anything. Halted for an instant by Ticknor's quick move, it recommenced its tortuous crawling toward us.

The nearest tentacle darted toward me, knocked me over like a tenpin as it swept under my feet, and then doubled back again. Its prehensile end coiled savagely around me.

The living length of ice-cold gristle had caught me around the thighs. I felt myself lifted up, heard myself scream

incoherently as I hung head down in the vise-like grip.

The world whirled upside down before me. I saw Brock, with a desperate leap, hurdle over the curling arm that sought to trap him. I saw Ticknor knocked down as I had been; saw, just before I was whirled in such a way that I was faced in the opposite direction, the tentacle poised to smash him. . . .

There was a hollow, muffled reverberation—as if, under a fifty-foot blanket, a world were being blown up.

The awful grip on my thighs relaxed. The tentacle dropped me. I sprawled on arms and neck and shoulders, and saw the living hawser coiling and uncoiling—now as a thing apart! For I could see *both* ends of it, with no great body jointed to its thickest end.

Dazed, I stared at the parent sac. . . .

It was riven and split from end to end. The eyes were filmed. From the great beak gushed a pale, thick fluid that served the monster for blood. Two of the thing's thrusting arms had been torn loose; and the others were jerking and writhing with the creature's death agony.

The trinitele bullet had exploded in the monster's vitals; how and why was for the moment no concern of ours. The only thing that mattered was that, incredibly, we had been saved.

I felt Brock lifting me to my feet. My legs were numb from the waist down because of the crushing grip of the tentacle. Had that grisly rope got me in the waist instead of around the fleshy part of the legs, I would have been gasping my life out at that moment from internal injuries.

As it was I found, after a few seconds, that I could stand. I could even totter a few steps toward Ticknor, in Brock's wake, to help him.

There was a bleeding gash in Ticknor's head; he had been dashed heavily to the rock platform. But in a moment he, too, was on his feet.

The three of us stared at the pond where, in a weak smother of foam, the great devil-fish—or whatever it may have been—was slowly sinking, never to thrust its bulk up into the sunlight again.

I think Brock and Ticknor were as busy thanking our own God for deliverance from this, the god of the lizard-men, as I was. Certainly Ticknor was, for he said:

"Something much more powerful than chance must have sent that bullet into the thing's stomach instead of letting it smash against its beak as we intended."

"But why—what happened?" said Brock shakily.

"I don't know for certain. But I think the powerful acids of digestion in the creature's stomach ate through the thin steel shell of the bullet almost at once. After that—well, the slightest drop of moisture explodes trinitele, you know."

The roaring of the lizard-men overhead aroused us from fruitless speculations. They were raging, the two-legged things with the crocodilian heads. Their god! We, three despised humans, had by some magic destroyed it. We could imagine what would happen to us once we were in their hands again.

"They said we could go free if we conquered their god," muttered Brock. But his voice was more than doubtful.

Ticknor shook his head. "That promise won't mean much—once they get their claws on us."

"But how will they get to us?" I asked. "There seem to be no steps leading down here, and we haven't seen such a thing as a rope anywhere in the mound city."

We stared at each other. It did look as though we were safe from the raging mob of lizard-men for a little while. But:

"It works both ways," said Brock. "If they can't get down—we can't get up! We're everlastingly trapped in this sink-hole."

"I suppose," mused Ticknor, "that never before in their history has there been any need of steps or ropes leading in here. Once a creature was thrown into the pool, there was no necessity for trying to get hold of it again!"

"But there must be a way——" Brock started to reply.

Then I exclaimed aloud, and pointed across the pool to the farther wall of the pit. There, a black hole in the cliff side, was a shallow arch reaching up only a foot or so from the water. It looked as though it might be the top of a passage-mouth of some sort leading away from the pool. It was so inconspicuous that we could not be sure what it really was; so inconspicuous, indeed, that till this moment none of us had noticed it at all.

"That might be a tunnel, or sort of drain, leading up and away from here," I suggested.

Brock nodded. "It's only reasonable to suppose that the lizard-men have some sort of running water arrangement into and out of this pool to supply their overgrown goldfish with fresh water. That might be the inlet; the outlet is probably under the surface somewhere."

Whatever it was, the black hole in the cliff side seemed the only possible avenue of escape from the pit. But to reach it, we would have to swim the width of the pool. And the thought of diving into that angry black water and traversing fifty yards of it gave us the shudders. For all we knew there was more than one tentacled monster in those depths—a mate to the thing the trinitele bullet had annihilated, perhaps; or an infernal spawn of smaller ones that would be able to drag us down with ease once we got in their own element with them.

Nevertheless the passage had to be made. We knew without thinking twice about it that the promise of the lizard-men—to let us go free if we destroyed their god—would be disregarded utterly if they caught us again. And catch us eventually they would if we stayed on that ledge.

We took off our tattered, ripped coats, and our shoes. The coats we discarded. The shoes, reckoning with our too soft and civilized feet, we fastened by the laces around our necks. Then we lowered ourselves, frightened blue, into the ominous quiet of the pond.

No deadly arms reached up for us as we swam the distance from our ledge to the black hole in the farther cliff. Once Brock shouted and splashed as a great gray mass touched him. But it was only a dead tentacle from the devil-fish we had killed, floating awash in the center of the pond.

As we swam, the crowds of infuriated lizard-men up above, on the rim of the pit, stumped along abreast of us. And though of course we could understand no croaked syllable of their language, the tone of their bellowing told what they would do to us if they got us again.

We reached the arch, and found it was indeed the top of a passage leading down into the pit. Treading water, we gazed awfully into the dark depth of the tunnel.

With the brilliant sunlight blinding us, we could see up its length only a few feet. But we could see that for all of that distance the top of the tunnel was only eighteen inches or so clear of the water level. That meant that, should the roof of the passage dip ever so little, any one trying to get through would have to swim

under water—trusting to the high gods that the roof lifted again before the water drowned him!

There was no choice to be made, however. And Brock, after only a few seconds' hesitation, found the bottom of the hole with questing hands and climbed in. We followed, discovering that we could stand almost upright in the passageway, with our chins barely clearing the top of the water.

There was a steady current sweeping noiselessly against us toward the pool. It was not enough to tear at our footing; but was a solid force against forward motion.

Thrusting laboriously against this current, we started up the gradually sloping incline of the tunnel, holding our breaths and ducking our heads under water now and then as the roof dipped down—heading in the darkness toward we could not guess what.

11

We had gone only a little way up the pitch-black subterranean passage when we began to think that perhaps it was not an artificial tunnel as we had at first surmised, but a natural rift in the rock.

The footing was heartbreakingly uneven. Twice in as many minutes we found ourselves floundering over our heads in the water. And three times the roof above dipped down below the surface so that we were forced to swim against the current, submerged, and faced with the possibility of never getting our heads up to breathe again. And then we entered a portion of the passageway that proved it was a natural fissure and not a man- (or lizard-man-) made thing.

We came out into a long, low cavern. And simultaneously we emerged into light. It was a dim light, greenish, ghostly; and had our eyes not become accustomed to pure blackness we'd hardly have recognized it as light at all. As it was, we could see quite well in it. I don't know what made it; possibly some microscopic plant or animal organism covering walls and roof, for it was undoubtedly phosphorescent in origin.

At first the presence of the dim light was a relief after the oppressing darkness of the tunnel. But in a moment the light revealed that which almost made us wish we had been left in black ignorance.

About twenty yards wide and twice that in length, the cave extended before us, with the smooth rolling river against which we had travelled flowing across its floor in a wide shallow channel. The river came from a tunnel on the farther side identical with the tunnel we had just quitted. Our problem was to cross the cave, enter that black opening, and recommence our search for a way into upper air.

But the problem of crossing the cave. . . .

It was a snakes' den, that cavern. But such snakes! There were only four of them, looping slowly over the rough rock floor, twining about stalagmites as in upper air they might have twined around tree trunks; but these four were enormous.

For forty or fifty feet their lengths trailed across the floor. They were grayish white, slug-like things; and we could see that they were eyeless. Centuries of living underground (existing on God knew what for their prey) had turned them this ghastly color and taken away the sight that was useless to them.

That there were more of the dread things than these four, we soon found out. Even as we stared, speechless, at the menace of them, we heard a dry rasping sound to our right, and gazed quickly there.

From a ragged fissure in the right wall a blunt, eyeless head poked forth. This was followed by yard on yard of body, as the great snake slid out of the fissure, across the width of the cave, and into a fissure on the other side. Endlessly the monster slid into this second runway, and finally was gone.

With our heads close together, we whispered the situation over.

"We can't go back," said Brock. "We know what's there—the pool, and a reception committee of lizard-men. We've got to go on."

"But how can we?"

"The things are blind," Brock pointed out. "They can only hear or scent us. Perhaps a quick dash might get us past them and to the other tunnel opening."

"I think they've winded us already," whispered Ticknor suddenly. "Look."

The gigantic serpents were weaving uneasily, their thick coils sliding along the floor in this direction and that.

"Then we'd better hurry," said Brock, his jaw muscles standing out in heavy ridges as he tensed his body for the effort.

Without another word he started to run across the cave, leaping noiselessly on bare feet from one level spot to another. We watched breathlessly.

There was no clear path anywhere. In two places living lengths of death stretched from wall to wall of the cave. Brock neared the first.

Without slackening his pace he rushed toward it, and leaped with all his strength, drawing his legs up under him as a high-jumper does to clear a high bar. He soared over the column of a body, lit on the other side, went on. The second living trap stretched before him.

He hurdled this, too, but his foot dislodged a piece of rock as he landed. Instantly with the small noise the serpent he had jumped whipped its length into a circle around the spot and constricted its coils.

I don't think Brock's feet, leaving the ground in a second frantic leap, were missed by more than a few inches by the closing coil. But they *were* missed; and next moment he was standing beside the far tunnel—waiting for us.

Ticknor glanced at me. He shook his head.

"I haven't the youth and strength to do that," he whispered. His face was white as chalk, but there was no fear in it. "Go on, Woodward, follow him."

"What will you do?"

"I'll manage. I have another plan of crossing this cave. But it's apt to stir the things up so that whoever followed me would surely be caught."

I stared at him. I knew his courage; and I had more than a suspicion that he meant to sacrifice himself in some way to save us—figuring that he could never cross the cavern alive anyhow.

"Go on!" he snapped. "I'll come last, I tell you!"

Still I would not have gone till he had started. But our move was decided for us. Two of the monsters started to crawl sinuously toward us. Tiny, deep-buried ears or nostrils had located us at last.

Instantly we leaped away from there, Ticknor to the right, I to the left. And I kept on going!

I followed Brock's procedure, racing noiselessly toward the far tunnel mouth regardless of the swollen serpents in the path. And as he had done, I managed to make my legs propel my body across the cave and over the snakes before any of the looping coils could trap me. Beside Brock at last, I turned anxiously to gaze at Ticknor.

He was still at the far side, where he had been when I left him. The two of us gazed with our hearts in our throats. As

he had said, he had neither the youth nor the supple strength to accomplish that hazardous trip among the blind monsters as we had. What then could he do?

We saw in a moment what he could do! And never have I been prouder of my own race, or realized quite so fully just how it happens that man, with his brain, has survived countless huger and more muscled forms of life through the ages.

TICKNOR stooped down and gathered up an armful of rock fragments. Then he started toward us—walking.

His forte was not speed, so he concentrated on noiselessness. Not a sound was made by his slow-moving feet. He crept across the rock like a shadow. But before him at last stretched one of the uneasily moving serpents. Soundlessness would not help him there. He had to get over that steely-strong bulk.

He stopped about twenty feet from the writhing tail of the thing. His arm arched back and forward, as he threw one of his rock fragments—up toward the mighty serpent's head.

Instantly with the echoing crash of rock on rock, the great snake coiled its length toward the place where the stone had hit. Hissing like a steam-engine, it wound and unwound over the spot, avid coils straining to clamp around the thing that had made the noise.

But during the few seconds when the tail had been drawn out of his way, Ticknor was past the spot it unconsciously guarded, and was walking on tiptoe toward the next.

What a scene! I can close my eyes and see it yet.

Forty yards away, sliding restlessly about the mouth of the tunnel we had just quitted, still seeking the creatures they had sensed as standing there a few moments before, were the two huge snakes that had sent Ticknor and me leaping to right and left. Then, nearer us, whipping back and forth over the spot where Ticknor's stone had crashed, was a third great, scaled length. Nearer still, the stocky, gray-haired man in tattered blue trousers and ripped shirt picked his noiseless way over the rough rock; and between him and us stretched the fourth and last snake.

Ticknor was tiptoeing toward the tail of the thing, as he had done with its fellow. But as he got within a short distance of it, the serpent suddenly turned its head and began to move straight toward him.

In an instant the scaly monster had formed into a great U, with Ticknor in the open end—and that open end closing almost more rapidly than the eye could follow.

Brock and I groaned aloud. Ticknor couldn't repeat his first performance and attract the thing's attention to a distant spot by tossing a rock toward its head. If he did the blind length would certainly brush against him as it uncoiled and sought the source of the noise. But Ticknor was not beaten yet.

His quick brain took in the situation as swiftly as ours did; more swiftly, I think, from the quickness with which he made his next move.

He sprang backward before the mouth of the living U could close over him. The wall of the cave stopped his retreat. But five feet up was a hand-hold, and above this another.

He scaled the wall. Under him the U snapped into an O. He held on with one hand, and threw a piece of rock into the center of the O with the other. . . .

Again the low cavern resounded with a hiss like that of escaping steam. The O closed into a thing of massing coils rasp-

ing against each other with frightful pressure. But in that instant Ticknor had dropped soundlessly from the niche in the wall and was beside us.

We started to plunge into the tunnel and away from that nightmare place. But Ticknor stopped us with a gesture. Then he picked up more rock fragments and began throwing them toward the far end of the cave. At once the two blind monsters near us slid away from our end, to tangle and writhe with the other two in an infuriated search for the things that were crashing about in their den.

"I wouldn't care to have one of those creatures follow after us up the tunnel," said Ticknor levelly. And so he dismissed the danger—worse for him than for us—that he had just passed through.

WE FOUND the second stage of our journey easier than the first. At least, from a physical standpoint it was easier. Mentally . . .

Well, we thought at any instant to meet one of the great blind serpents swimming down the current toward us; and that thought, as we fought our way forward in the abysmal darkness, kept the cold sweat standing out on our foreheads. Too, every now and then our bare feet came in contact with blobs of cold, viscous life of some unseen sort — apparently helpless, but freezing the blood in our veins at every contact through fear that *this* time it was something that was *not* helpless.

The footing was better though, and in a short time the water bed had widened and shallowed till we were no longer in danger of constant submersion but walked in water only up to our waists.

And then, at last, we saw light ahead!

Daylight! You can't imagine how infinitely welcome ordinary sunlight can be until you have been prisoned underground away from it, and given to understand that only through phenomenal good luck may you ever set eyes on it again.

We rushed toward it, Brock first, then I, and then Ticknor; splashing in single file in the waist-high flood toward the blessed sunlight.

The sound of a cataract filled our ears as we hurried on. We saw a rainbow of sunlight on falling water. Suddenly the tunnel ended—in a thin sheet of water pouring down from some source twenty feet over our heads.

A roughly circular hole in the earth yawned above us; and over one edge, like water pouring down a drain, came the leaping brook up whose bed and against whose current we had been climbing since we left the black pool of the lizard-men's god.

Twenty feet up was this hole opening in outer earth. But the walls, though steep, were not unscalable.

Brock turned to me, shouting to make his voice heard above the cataract.

"Stand on my shoulders till you can reach that knob of rock there. Then between us we can get Ticknor up——"

He stopped, and began to stare bewilderedly around. I did, too, pausing after a moment to peer at him with an unspoken plea to be told that my senses had not gone back on me, and that I was seeing straight. But the sight of his face told me that; and together we looked again around the narrow confines of the natural well in which we found ourselves.

There had been three of us. Now there were two. Ticknor was gone!

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ON A single impulse we both crowded back into the black tunnel, splashing downstream in the direction from which we had come. As we went we shouted Ticknor's name; but nothing answered

save the desolate echoes of our own voices.

We soon stopped the backtracking.

"He couldn't have fallen and been swept back by the stream," said Brock, his voice strained and hoarse. "The creek bed is level, and the current is not at all strong here. What in the name of heaven has happened?"

I shook my head. It was more than I could figure out. No side tunnels branched away as far as we could see. No living thing of any danger appeared to be near.

"Maybe one of the snakes from the cave followed after all, and caught him. He was last in line. One of the things might have got him suddenly from the rear and pulled him under the surface so that in the noise of our splashing we didn't hear it."

At the thought we blenched. But no other possibility suggested itself; and eventually we went back to the sunlit well. Nothing on earth or under it could help Ticknor now!

Brock's face was a mask. But his eyes betrayed the depth of his friendship for the little man, and his profound sorrow at his loss. Without a word, though, he strode to the roughest wall and started to climb up it. I followed; and in a moment we were in the good upper air again.

We found ourselves in one of the patches of dense forest that covered most of the five-hundred-mile oasis in the glacial ice. Immediately on coming out of our hole in the ground we crouched down between the high roots of a giant forest monarch on the order of our banyan tree.

Interminable as the tunnel had seemed to us, it could not reach more than half a mile from the black pit into which we had been flung. As the pit was on the edge of the mound city, we could be certain that the headquarters of the lizard-men lay less than a mile from where we crouched. For all we knew, the forest around us, at that very moment, was swarming with the crocodilian monsters. It was up to us to move very, very cautiously.

"What had we better do?" I whispered to Brock, after a prolonged scrutiny of the woods about us had revealed none of the lizard-men.

"Follow up what you started with Gayta five days ago," he said. "When she left that prison-house of ours, she had every intention of doing as you said: carrying word of the lizard-god's coming death to all the villages in the oasis, and showing the men how to arm themselves for revolt with wooden spears. I could see it in her eyes. If the men here have half her grit——"

"I believe they have," I said. "Anyhow, a pack of rabbits could be stung to fight when they've been for centuries under such tyranny as the lizard-men wield."

"You told Gayta to set the day of attack at five days after the lizard-men's feasting was over, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"Then let's try to find the way to Gayta's village and join the men there in their preparations. You know"—his face went grim—"there's no other course for us to follow now but make this place as decent a land as possible to live in. For we'll be living in it, if we escape the lizard-men, for a good many years!"

I nodded. The scientific genius that, through miscalculation, had brought us here, was the only power that could possibly get us out again. No Professor Ticknor, no time-machine.

And Ticknor, or what was left of him, was now in the belly of some one of those loathsome blind serpents back in the deep-buried cave.

"Where do you reckon the village of Gayta's people is?"

Brock considered my question a moment, bringing to bear on the problem of location all the powers of woodcraft he had cultivated in the few forest patches left in the world of 1990. Finally he pointed off to the left—to the west, as the sun, just dipping past noon, told me.

"It lies there," he said. "Come on."

We looked around again, and saw no living thing. We left the shelter of the roots, and started toward a well-defined trail leading in the direction we wanted to go. We got to the trail, stepped down it. . . .

BROCK stopped so abruptly that I almost bumped into him. He listened sharply. In a few seconds I heard a repetition of the sound that had stopped him—a twig snapping. The little noise had come from behind us. I whirled around.

Standing in the trail, blocking the way back, were two of the dread lizard-men. Noiseless as smoke they had stolen from cover and were now stumping slowly toward us.

I heard Brock curse. "They're ahead of us, too!" he snapped.

They were. Two more stood in the path before us. And now from above shrubs and bushes to the sides appeared the repulsive, reptilian heads. We were completely surrounded by the saurian monsters.

In a close ring they began to hem us in —twenty of the things at least. Slowly they moved, laboriously, sluggish and distended still from their gluttonous feasting. But they took no chances on our fleetness of foot allowing us to escape. There was no breaking that close ring.

"The trees," Brock rapped out.

Just as the lizard-men began to stump toward us more swiftly, reaching out to clutch us in their clawed, four-fingered hands, we leaped for a low-hanging bough over our heads.

We made it safely, and without pause climbed to higher levels. With thirty feet between us and the band that had followed to the outlet mouth of the drain into the black pool, we stopped and looked down.

Two of the ten-foot creatures were already scaling the tree trunk after us. They climbed heavily; we could hear their breaths whistling through their pits of nostrils. The dead weight of food in their bellies was slowing them considerably; but their strength was just a little more than equal to the load, and their claws were ideally adapted for tree-climbing. We saw that there was no sanctuary for us in the branches.

"Maybe we can reach that next tree," said Brock, pointing to a twin to the forest giant we were in. The branches of the two almost touched. A jump looked easy.

One of the hideous lizard-heads poked through a tangle of leaves just beneath our resting-place, and the thing's cold eyes stared balefully at us. We edged out along a branch, leaped for the next tree. . . .

I don't know to this day precisely what happened. I think both of us jumped at the same time and were unwise enough, in our haste, to land on the same tree limb.

At any rate I heard a cracking, rending sound; and next moment Brock and I had fallen heavily to the ground and were trying dazedly to untangle ourselves from the leafy branch that had broken and plunged us earthward.

In an instant, icy, scaled hands were on us. Ten to one, the lizard-men swarmed over us. We fought insanely to free ourselves, but we hadn't a chance.

We were hauled to our feet, as many hands clutching us as could find room on our legs and arms. The two lizard-men that had climbed the tree after us awkwardly climbed down again and joined the others.

Ferociously they stared at us, with the greenish glare we knew to be their flag of rage flying in their reptilian eyes.

Finally one of their number croaked a brief sentence. In an almost human way, eagerly, all nodded. They moved yet closer. We could feel their fetid breaths against our faces.

Their long, toothed jaws clashed. Moisture oozed from their corners; and serpentine tongues licked fleshless lips. No great power of divination was required to learn what they intended doing with us now that at last they had caught us again. We were going to be devoured where we stood! No more pretense of a trial, and no taking us back to their ruler for a second sentence to be passed upon us.

I got my legs free, and desperately kicked out at the nightmare bodies crowding close. It was like kicking at tree trunks. The only damage I did was to my own feet.

And then, staring wide-eyed into the forest between the scaled bodies of the two lizard-men closest to me, I saw something that sent the blood spinning wildly through my brain.

I saw, for a fraction of a second, a blue wood-flower. But it had moved, that flower, as no natural flower could move; and I could have sworn I had seen a flash of white-gold hair under it!

And in that instant there was a concerted roar of human voices from behind us, and from the woods poured scores of men.

Men! Humans like ourselves! The forest folk, of Gayta's sort, that had first befriended us! And they were armed—for the first time no doubt in centuries of slavery to the lizard-creatures—with long, pointed bars of wood. Spears; and remarkably good spears, too, considering the fact that no one of them had ever seen a spear before and had made them according to the direction of a girl who had but a rough drawing to go by.

With a bellow of rage, the lizard-men released us and whirled to attack the contemptible human things that had dared at last to rise in rebellion. And then the despised humans were on their age-long oppressors, wielding their spears inexpertly, but doing marvelous damage with them just the same.

They darted around the paunch-swollen lizard-men like a pack of small dogs worrying a band of boars. And as they fought they snarled and shouted their hate. Berserk, they were!

"Will the gentle forest people have the courage to fight, even if they hear the lizard-men's god is dead and are given weapons?" we had asked ourselves.

Here, then, was our answer. Would they! Their courage was fanatic, crazed! They rushed in to their deaths as though they yearned for death; and fought as long as a drop of blood remained in their terribly wounded bodies.

In no time Brock and I had found a spear apiece lying beside dead bodies on the ground. We charged in shoulder to shoulder with the forest folk, plunging the fire-hardened points at the food-distended bodies. If the points found a jointure in the scaled armor of the things, it went in to the creature's vitals. If it glanced off a heavily armored patch it was liable to throw its wielder—when the chances were two to one that the fallen man would be clawed to pieces before he could get up again.

I saw Brock plunge his spear into one of the monsters with such force that the hard wood point stuck out two feet clear of the lizard-man's back. I saw him whirled off his feet by the dying thing's convulsive jerking, saw him land a dozen feet away, almost under the body of a hissing, croaking lizard-man.

Then the kaleidoscopic bit of battle shifted closer home as I felt claws rake along my scalp and whirled to see a lizard-man reaching, like a falling tree, to clutch me in its long, snaky arms.

I tried to leap backward, tripped and fell heavily. But as I fell I contrived to keep my spear-point slanted up and its butt fairly well grounded. When the lizard-man sprang to fall on me and tear me to pieces, it fell on the spear-point instead. A spurt of cold, black blood splattered against me. The dying monster reached feebly for me, but I eluded the clutching, spasmodically clenching hands, and got to my feet.

Another spear was lying within easy reach. Ah, there were only too many spears, drenched with their owners' blood, lying about. Only three of the lizard-men were left standing—tall, battered towers, undone more by their gluttonous feasting than by the new weapons of their slaves. But at least thirty humans had been killed.

And now the lizard-men proved the heights of intelligence they had attained in the amazingly lofty peak they had reached in the scale of evolution.

One of them quickly leaned down, and seized a dead human's spear! At once the other two survivors followed suit; and the battle that followed was even, in spite of odds of six to one in favor of humanity.

With a furious hiss the one that had first picked up a spear swung on a charging man, pierced him through with one hand, and with the other plucked the wretch off the spear-point and tossed his dying body far into the woods.

I lowered my spear and charged at him. A man got there first—was treated as his luckless fellow had been. But my spear, coming a second later, ripped into the lizard-man's distended paunch before the thing could center its attention on me. I ripped the weapon loose, plunged again with it.

With a hissing scream, it dropped its spear and caught me around the waist in its two great hands. I tasted death. But I saw Brock's great shoulders heave behind the monster—and suddenly saw a spear-point appear through the scaled chest within a foot of my face. The clutching hands tightened, then went limp. I dropped, with the bulk of the lizard-man crushing me and black fluid from its pierced heart oozing over my body.

When I had painfully heaved my way clear again, I saw a battle won, a struggle ended.

The last two lizard-men were down. A human swung his spear even as I got shakily to my feet, and ended the last writhing struggles of the last monster. Then, chattering and bragging like vain children, the forest men faced each other. They had beaten the lizard-men. The impossible had happened. Truly the lizard-men's god must be dead as we had prophesied; and the day of humans' victory and the lizard tyrants' downfall had dawned.

But at what a cost had they won!

I counted thirty-seven human bodies—two of them for every one of the dead lizard-men. And the twisted, mangled remains of these dead humans showed how horribly they had perished.

But the survivors, drunk with wonderful victory, hardly even glanced at them. They crowded about Brock and me,

chattering and wildly laughing. Then, over their shoulders, I saw my blue flower again. And next instant Gayta stood beside me, squeezing my hand almost fiercely in her two small ones.

"I thought never to see you again," she gasped. "And you are here . . . and alive . . . but you are hurt," she ended quickly.

She bathed the deep cut in my scalp with water from the brook—that same brook which emptied into the pool in the distant pit—and bound it with a strip of the soft bark cloth of her tunic. Brock was gashed in half a dozen places; and he too got the attention and comfort of her clever fingers.

"We were just starting for your village," I said to her at last, "when this band of the lizard-men caught us."

"That is well," she replied. "For my village has been chosen by all as the meeting-place of the humans in their uprising against the lizard-folk. Let us go there at once. By the time we arrive, all the rest should be there."

"By what wonderful chance did you happen to be at this spot with your fighting men in time to rescue us?" I asked her.

She smiled. "When I left you five days ago, I went at once to six villages. In each I gave your message that the god was dead. In each I showed how to make the fire-hardened, pointed wood sticks, and in each I picked messengers to go with the same words to all the other villages. In the last I gathered this band of men to lead personally back to my own central village. Just before we left, an old, old man sought me out. He told of a passage under the earth leading to this spot from the god's pool. He said if you escaped we might find you here. So we were hurrying to reach this place when we heard the sound of your recapture."

But now she stopped, and a shadow came over her face. "The small man—where is he?"

Brock spread his big hands. "Ticknor is . . . gone," he said heavily. "Something got him in the tunnel."

Gayta looked her heartfelt sympathy; but in common with most primitive folk she did not waste too much time over irrevocable death.

"You two are left—which is well. And you two shall come and lead us to victory when we attack the city of the lizard-men."

This story rises to a great climax of sheer horror in the smashing chapters that bring the tale to a thrilling conclusion in next month's WEIRD TALES

"Then a dreadful metamorphosis began to take place."

The Silver Bullet

By PHYLLIS A. WHITNEY

An eldritch tale of horror, of a terrible adventure on Loon Mountain, and a talisman that was potent in the old days against witches and warlocks

FOG writhed up from the hollow of Loon Valley and crawled thick and yellow before the headlights of the car. Ramsay's hands tightened on the wheel as he swung away from destruction and back onto the muddy, unseen road. He glanced once at the white-lipped woman beside him and then gave his at-

tention to the obscurity that whirled beneath the wheels of the car.

"We can't go on," he said at last. "It's impossible to see the road. I can't risk it."

From the corner of his eye he could see the convulsive movement of the woman's hands in her lap.

"Linda!" he warned.

Again her hands twitched. "It's this beastly fog. It has a slimy feel against my face—as though I'd been touched by a slug. We *must* go on, Gordon."

Quietly he applied the brakes. He could feel the sucking of the tires as the car came to a halt in the mud. The woman gave a little moan of despair and sank back in her seat. He watched her for a moment in silence, trying to recall MacDonald's exact words.

How had the doctor put it? That if ever she were to overcome her strangeness, these whims of Linda's must not go unchallenged.

"My dear," he said, "we've come here to help you—to hunt back to the very beginnings of your life and lay them in the open. Once we've discovered the reason, the origin of these nervous spells, we can exorcise them and you'll be well again."

"Exorcise!" she repeated. "What a horrible word! As though I were possessed by devils." She laughed with a faint note of hysteria in her voice, only to break off as the sound struck flatly against the crawling wall of fog.

Ramsay lowered the window beside her and stared into the writhing darkness.

"Look!" he cried, suddenly eager. "I do believe we're near a house. Isn't that a light?"

The fog thinned, drew aside its heavy folds and then rolled soundlessly back upon its tracks again. In the instant of clearing, however, the light had been visible—a square, dim eye in the mountain above them.

"We'll go there," he said, "and ask for directions. Perhaps we can find a place to put up for the night."

Linda sat motionless as he got out and went around the car to open her door. "We shouldn't have come, Gordon. My mother must have had some terrible reason for sending me away from Loon Mountain with strangers when I was a baby. There's something revolting about the very name of the place. Loon Mountain! I've said it over and over to myself until it begins to sound like the words of an idiot."

Ramsay took her arm impatiently. These fantasies of his wife's were beyond the understanding of his own practical mind. He knew only that he must follow MacDonald's directions and get to the bottom of the thing.

BRAMBLES caught at their ankles as they struggled toward the light, and once a fog-wet branch slapped across their cheeks.

"It *is* slimy," Linda said, wiping the moisture from her face with a quick gesture of disgust.

The eye grew larger as they stumbled up the hillside, and they were able to discern the wavering black outline of a building through the fog. Two pointed gables pierced the night like the pricked ears of a wolf, while across the entire front stretched a ramshackle veranda, its cracked palings forming an eery, broken-toothed grin.

Ramsay lifted his fist to the door, and at the first echo of his knock the gleaming eye of the window was wiped from existence, leaving the night darker than before. There was a faint, clicking sound from the room beyond, and although he

could see nothing, the man received the strange impression of a human eye staring at him through a knothole in the door.

Linda's hand lay heavily upon his arm. "Come away!" she whispered.

But even as she spoke, light reappeared at the window and the door was pulled inward, leaving the two upon its threshold blinking in the flood of light. A woman stood in the opening with her back to the illumination, so that her face and the details of her person were invisible.

"What do you want?" she asked in a voice which, heard there on the lonely mountainside, seemed possessed of an odd, metallic beauty.

"The fog made it unsafe for driving," Ramsay said. "We were bound for Loon Mountain—the town on Loon Mountain."

"*This* is Loon Mountain," the woman told him, continuing to stand uninvitingly in the doorway. "But the town is five miles down the road."

"Five miles!" Ramsay echoed. "It might as well be a hundred in weather like this. There's a sheer precipice on the left of the road, and my wife is nervous."

He could see the turning of the woman's body as she moved her eyes. Apparently she was looking at Linda for the first time.

"Come in," she said, stepping abruptly back into the room.

The words were more a command than an invitation. Linda obeyed and Ramsay followed his wife through the doorway. Immediately their hostess flung the door shut behind them and Ramsay experienced an odd sense of relief, as if for the first time since they had begun the upward journey from the valley, they had truly escaped the groping fog-fingers.

The woman had crossed the bare floor of the room and was standing beside a deal table, her hands fumbling at a kerosene lamp. She presented a somewhat startling figure to Ramsay's city-accustomed eyes. Her dress was of a heavy dark material, sack-like and without style or shape, while about her head her hair was wound in coil after night-black coil, smooth and gleaming as satin.

Even as he considered her she turned from the lamp and he was able to view for the first time the utter, wild beauty of her face; an alarming beauty that sent his eyes shifting hurriedly to Linda's own dusky, more passive loveliness. It was a relief to see Linda's yellow, modern little sport dress, her tinted fingernails and the yellow felt hat pulled down upon her dark waves of hair. She seemed so entirely sane and as far removed from this strange, black-clad creature as the sunshine of noonday was from midnight.

Linda, too, had felt the spell of the other's beauty. She was staring with velvet-dark eyes that seemed abnormally large in the whiteness of her face.

"Now that we know just how far the town is," she said hesitantly, "perhaps we'd better go on. We can travel slowly and there will probably be a hotel——"

"You can stay here," the woman offered. "This used to be a hotel. We still take people in now and then."

Ramsay accepted quickly, grateful enough to postpone the journey along the mountainside.

Without further speech the woman opened a drawer in the table and drew out a candle which she set in a grease-spattered holder. She had just lighted a match and was bringing it near the wick when, somewhere behind Ramsay, a door was opened. Under ordinary circumstances he would have turned at once to view the newcomer, but something in the utter quiet of the woman in black held his attention.

It was as though all power of motion had been drained from her body at the sound of that opening door. She stood with the candle in one hand and the burning match in the other, and made no effort to bring the two together. There was something horrid in her frozen immobility. Ramsay watched in fascination while the match burned nearer and nearer her fingers. Surely it was singeing her skin. And then, when he was sure that the smell of burning flesh had risen in the room, the tension snapped and with a quick flick of her hand the match was extinguished and hurled to the floor.

She turned and faced the door, and Ramsay turned also, finding his will suddenly freed. Framed against the blackness of the corridor behind him stood a man, a tall, spare individual with darkly yellowed skin, inky hair and the most curious eyes Ramsay had ever seen. They possessed a flickering, greenish flatness and moved not at all in their sockets, but stared straight ahead while a strange shimmer, like the flutter of green moonlight on water, went on in their depths.

The woman in black moved quickly across the room, threw out a long, slim-fingered hand and shut the door abruptly in that staring face. Then, with no word of explanation, she returned to the lighting of her candle.

RAMSAY found himself listening tensely for departing footsteps beyond the door, but there came no sound. Was the fellow still standing there with his flickering eyes fixed upon the closed door, like the eyes of a corpse upon the lid of its coffin? God! what a terrible thought! Was this night going to leave him as nervous and fanciful as Linda?

"I'll fetch our bags from the car," he muttered and went reluctantly back to the fog.

When he returned, the woman was awaiting him with her candle ready. She crossed to the door leading into the corridor, and it seemed to Ramsay that she hesitated for the merest instant before flinging it open. When she did so, the long hallway stretched empty and dark into the far reaches of the house. Linda followed the moving candle, stopping once to look back at Ramsay, her eyes glittering too brightly in the flicker of light.

At the end of the door-lined corridor a staircase presented itself to view, steep and narrow, with steps that creaked beneath the weight of their mounting feet. Again there was a corridor to traverse and again there were closed doors on every side. What was there about a closed door, Ramsay thought, to give him this sense of hidden evil? After all, the many rooms must be vacant, disused, harboring only dust and echoes, and perhaps a stray rat or two.

He was relieved, however, when they came to a halt and their hostess took a key from the pocket of her sack-like dress and fitted it to the keyhole of the last door. It screeched rustily in the lock and the door swung inward.

The room was large, with a bare expanse of dark floor. There were two iron bedsteads from which the dirty white paint had peeled in layers, one chair, a rickety washstand bearing a white bowl and cracked pitcher, and, as Ramsay saw with relief, a second kerosene lamp.

With the lamp burning, the place seemed more habitable. Their hostess departed for bedclothes and hot water and Linda drew off her felt hat with a weary gesture and laid it on the chair.

"My head feels so tired," she said, "so heavy."

Ramsay opened the two travelling-bags while Linda slipped out of her sport

jacket, leaving her arms bare in the sleeveless jumper beneath. Automatically Ramsay's eyes sought her left shoulder. He had learned that the odd little birthmark in the shape of an inverted cross was a gage by which he could reckon the depth of her emotion. When she was happy, calm, the mark was a pale rose, scarcely to be discerned against the smooth skin of her shoulder. It was not pale now, but glowed in a deep vermilion blush. He was suddenly conscience-stricken.

"Linda," he said, "if it means so much to you, we can go on even now. If this house frightens you, we won't stay."

She looked at him almost listlessly and began plucking at the pins that bound up her heavy dark hair.

"It's too late now." Her voice was without emotion and she stared at him for a second as if at a stranger. "Don't you understand? It's too late!"

The mark on her shoulder flushed to an angrier scarlet. She snatched the hairbrush from her bag and began to brush her hair vigorously, so that it covered her shoulders in a thick mantle and began to gleam with a life of its own.

A KNOCK upon the door bespoke the return of their hostess. She came into the room, her arms laden, and then paused to stare at Linda.

"Your hair!" she said in a low, startled voice.

Linda's brushing hand went steadily on. "Yes—my hair?"

"It's very beautiful. Smooth and sleek——"

"Like yours?" asked Linda softly.

It seemed to Ramsay in that instant that a strange look of understanding passed between the two; then the woman in black shook her head vaguely and turned toward the beds.

There was a long silence while she worked. When she had completed her task, she took a key from her pocket and laid it upon the washstand.

"For the door," she said to Ramsay. "You may want to lock it tonight."

She turned to go, but something in the sheen of Linda's hair seemed to fascinate her so that she paused to lift a long strand in her fingers, revealing the bare shoulder beneath, where the crimson mark burned against the flesh. The woman's eyes widened; her slender fingers clutched convulsively about the strand of hair, then let it slip away from her touch.

"You mustn't stay here!" she gasped. "You must go at once!"

"What do you mean?" Ramsay asked, more startled than he cared to admit.

The woman turned, her black eyes blazing. "Fool! To bring her here! You must go quickly—now!"

Strangely enough it was Linda who remained calm. "It wouldn't be any use to go now. It's too late."

The woman's head with its heavy bands of hair drooped in submission. Then her fingers sought again for the pocket of her dress and she drew forth a small object that shimmered in the light. She pressed the thing into Linda's hand.

"I've been keeping this for a long time, but I've never dared use it. Perhaps you will have more courage than I."

She was gone quickly, leaving Linda standing in the middle of the room, staring at the small, silvery thing in her hand.

"What is it?" Ramsay asked. "What was she talking about?"

Linda began to laugh with the old trace of hysteria in her voice. "It's fantastic! Idiotic! A silver bullet. Do you see?"—extending her palm to Ramsay. "A silver bullet!"

"What——" he began, but she broke in upon him, her voice lowered to a whisper.

"Don't you know? Fire and silver for witches and warlocks!"

Her laughter rose shrilly. Ramsay threw one arm about her shoulders and clapped a hand to her mouth. "I won't have you uttering such nonsense!"

She broke away from his grip with a strength that surprized him. "You should be reassured!" she cried mockingly. "You see—I'm not a witch. If I were, the very touch of silver would burn me. But it doesn't. I can hold it in my hand—like this."

"Yes," he said soothingly. "Of course you can."

Gradually her excitement subsided. Her body drooped like that of a weary child and tears came into her eyes. She was very light in his arms as he carried her to the bed.

"It isn't true," she whispered. "Tell me it isn't true! I mean—there aren't any witches? There couldn't be—because they burned them all in Salem."

"Hush!" he said. "There never were any witches except in fairy-tales."

Long after she had slipped into the soft, cool silk of her nightgown, he sat beside her bed, waiting for her to fall asleep. She had thrust the silver bullet beneath her pillow, and its presence seemed to comfort her, for her eyelids ceased to flutter and after a time she slept.

RAMSAY quietly locked the door. Then he walked to the one window and endeavored to peer into the night. Fog curled to the very sill, obscuring the mountainside. There was to be no sleep for him, he knew, as he sat down on his cot to watch and wait for dawn. Once daylight came, they would be on their way—out of this terrible Loon Mountain region with its unreal inhabitants and insane talk of witchcraft, away from that strangely beautiful woman and the mad, ghastly creature who had stared through the doorway downstairs. He wished he could erase the memory of the flat, shimmering gaze of the man into whose eyes he had looked so short a while before. Or was it a short while? Somehow his sense of time was vanishing. All memory, all recollection, seemed to consist of two flat-surfaced eyes that stared hypnotically—stared and flickered like some noiseless measure of time.

He blinked and shrugged his shoulders violently. He must stop thinking of those eyes. He must forget them—think about his surroundings, about Linda. He froze into sudden, terror-stricken immobility. The lamp—the kerosene lamp! It was out. But he did not remember its going. A gray streak of light had begun to crawl through the window. The *open* window. And it was dawn.

He started up from the cot, Linda's name on his lips. And then he saw.

Linda's bed was tumbled. The pillow bore the mark of her head, but Linda herself was gone!

He strode to the window and looked out upon the gray and ghostly morning. The fog had cleared a little, but it still lay in wreaths upon the drab shrubbery. The explanation of Linda's going was apparent. What a fool he had been not to examine the window more closely last night!

The room was located at the back of the house, and the window opened immediately upon a narrow veranda, which in turn could be reached by an easy swing from the sloping side of the hill. Out of that window Linda had been spirited while he had sat blindly upon his bed, dreaming of a strange green gaze.

He turned from the window and rushed across to the locked door. The rusty key defied him, only to give sud-

denly before the force of his twisting fingers. The corridor beyond was silent and filled with night. He gave no thought now to closed doors, but stumbled to the stairway, whose steps shrieked beneath the weight of his plunging feet.

The large room at the front of the house was empty.

He turned back through the corridors, shouting now, waking long-dead echoes with his strident voice. Every moment he expected to see a door open upon the banded head and black-garbed figure of the woman who had admitted him the night before. But no door opened, and when the last echo had died away only a heavy silence came down upon the house.

The silence was more terrible than all the tumult that had gone before. He fought against it, trying the doors systematically, banging upon their panels, but the echoes had a tired sound as though they longed to creep back to their crevices and sleep again through undisturbed years.

Every door was locked, and the corridors, graying now in the dawnlight, gave back only emptiness to his cries. In the end he gave up and returned to the room where Linda had slept. Perhaps, after all, this was only some terrible nightmare from which he would awake at any moment. Perhaps he would find Linda in her place beneath the bedclothes, her hair dusky against the white pillow. But the room was as empty as the rest of the house.

He sat down upon the one chair and buried his head in his hands, trying to force sanity into his benumbed brain.

After a time he heard a sound that brought him erect and tense, the sound of footsteps upon the porch below, the grating of a key in a lock.

He was out of the room and down the stairway in an instant. The bare front room had a human occupant this time, and he found himself exchanging stares with a little, straight-backed old man who gazed at him in astonishment.

"Well," the fellow drawled after a moment, "an' how did *you* get in here?"

"I was let in. We took a room for the night—my wife and I. And now my wife has——"

The little man tugged at his gray-peppered beard. "Slow up a bit, stranger. *Who* let you in?"

"Why—the woman who keeps the place. She——"

The old man shook his head. "There ain't no woman who keeps this place. *I* keep it. But I'm only a sort of caretaker. Nobody lives here any more."

"Do you think I'm mad?" Ramsay shouted. "I tell you a woman let us in last night. And now my wife's disappeared. I've got to find her!"

"If you've really lost somebody, I'll try an' help you. My name's Samuels. An' if you'll go ahead and give me the whole story without gettin' too excited about it, we'll see what we kin do."

How he got through that day, Ramsay never knew. He told his story to a dozen apathetic men of the countryside and each one shook his head in apparent doubt as to the teller's sanity. There was no such woman as he described on Loon Mountain. There was no one who could possibly have let him into the house. Some doubt was expressed as to the existence of Linda, until Ramsay brought down the yellow sport dress and shook it before their puzzled eyes.

Finally a search party was organized and sent out to scour the mountain. Ramsay remained behind. He had the strange feeling that somehow Linda might come back of her own accord, and she must not return to find him gone.

It was not until early evening that Samuels reappeared. He came into the room with a certain hesitancy in his step.

"I—I guess we've found her," he said, his bleared old eyes avoiding Ramsay's. "There's a gravel pit up yonder on the mountain."

"Where is she?" Ramsay cried, shaking the man's shoulder.

"Don't be in a hurry, son. It's too late for hurry now."

The significance of his words began to make itself felt.

"What do you mean? She—she's not hurt?"

"I hate to tell you, son. We—we found her at the bottom of the pit. Her—neck's broken, I guess."

Ramsay could only stare in horror. This *was* a nightmare! Why, only last night he and Linda—his eyes moved in slow fascination toward the veranda and the steps.

It was true, then. They were bringing her in now. His Linda. Her head was twisted terribly so that the black coils of her hair hung across her face and dripped toward the floor. The soft silk of her gown was muddied and torn, and against the dead white skin of her shoulder the tiny mark of an inverted cross stood out, livid and colorless.

There was a bench against one wall and the bearers laid their pitiful burden upon it and turned away.

Very gently Ramsay lifted the heavy strands of hair from her face and stared into the dark, sightless eyes. In the first instant of his looking the shock was too great to register properly. Then realization swept upon him—and relief. The face turned so blindly toward him was the face of that dark, strange woman of the night before.

He turned quietly to the uneasy men. "This is not my wife," he said.

He knew by the quick, sidelong glances they exchanged that they thought him mad. One after another turned away from him.

"Don't you know this woman?" he cried. "I tell you *she* is the one who let us in last night!"

Samuels looked down at the pale face. "She's not from hereabouts. I'd know if she was."

Perhaps in that instant Ramsay did go a little mad. Blank, futile walls seemed to be crowding upon him, crushing all thought, all power of reasoning. He sank onto a chair in a corner and sat with his face pressed into the cold dampness of his hands.

As the long moments slid away, it seemed to him that something hateful and malevolent was crowding itself into his consciousness. He steeled his mind against its onslaught, but the sense of a malicious shadow encroaching upon his reason persisted. He began to see with an intense clarity that he knew would be the last before the oblivion of madness swept down upon him—unless, by the strength of his own will, he could overthrow the menace.

Drunkenly he staggered to his feet and snatched up the heavy cylinder of the smoking lamp.

"Get out!" he cried. "All of you!" And he advanced upon the roomful waving the lamp like a vengeful torch.

At once the pressure upon his brain subsided. The people of Loon Mountain faded from the room and Ramsay knew the thing that was required of him if he was to save himself and reach Linda. He must be as cunning as the dark forces leagued against him. Never again must he gave way to despair, thus opening a doorway to all evil. And he must fight alone. By some strange intuition he knew that all the mountainside was

against him—little men like Samuels, with blurred and shifty eyes, crowding their lies upon him; driving him with a slow, devilish persistence until his mind would abandon its last outpost and they would be rid of him for ever.

They knew the identity of that tragic figure well enough. Of that he was certain. But they sought to bemuse him with their cunning until his reason recoiled so that he would take the dead woman and return to the world, a chattering simpleton, unaware that Linda remained behind.

LAMP in hand, Ramsay crossed the room and lifted the cloth from the face of the woman who lay upon the bench. How terrible she was in death! How bitterly beautiful! He stood for minutes, staring down upon her utter pallor, as if by the very force of his gaze he would draw out the secret—the dark mystery—from the languor of death.

Who was she? How came Linda's gown upon her bruised body? And what was the meaning of that mark upon her shoulder? Where lay the key to this entanglement of Linda's life and hers?

Overcoming a certain repugnance, he lifted a strand of hair that shrouded her shoulder and bent close above the mark. It was indeed the duplicate of the cross which Linda bore upon her upper arm. He allowed the hair to glide from his fingers absently and was startled to see the woman's head twist suddenly to one side.

It was the weight of the hair, he told himself, but the movement sent a chill of horror through his veins. It was as though the woman on the bench had, by some horrible power, twisted her head in order to stare past him with her wide, dead gaze. He followed the direction of that stare with his own eyes, fascinated in spite of himself.

It was then he saw the rifle, half shadowed by the open door which led to the hall. He crossed the room in an instant and snatched it up, his mind clear, his body ready for action. The feel of the weapon gave him back a sense of reality, brought release from the frenzy that had come down upon him with his first sight of Linda's empty bed.

The gun was unloaded, but there must be ammunition about the house. Once armed, he would not be afraid to venture into the mysteries of Loon Mountain. Somewhere out in the smother of darkness Linda was waiting for him to come to her help. He had failed her long enough.

But there was no ammunition to be found. He recalled then the silver bullet that Linda had placed beneath her pillow. That might serve, and it would be better to have a single shot in the gun than none at all.

He stumbled up the stairs and down the long corridor to the bedroom. Eagerly his fingers sought beneath the pillow. It was there! The cool silver made a talisman against the crowding shadow of the house as he went back down the stairs. He recalled Linda's words of the night before, less ready now to laugh them to scorn. Too many dark and unintelligible things had happened since then.

The bullet had evidently been cast for this very rifle. He slipped it into the chamber and then went out into the waiting silence of Loon Mountain.

FOG again! An undulating world of fog that twined slimy gray tentacles about him, thrusting him back and down with a weight that pressed upon his spirit rather than his body; that tugged at his eyelids and raised within him so deep a desire for sleep that he could scarcely deny the impulse.

He did deny it, however, with the new power that the knowledge of the loaded gun had given him. Straight up into the wet shrubbery of the mountainside he strode, and so heavy was the fog that the light from the open door behind him vanished instantly from view. For a little while he walked aimlessly, and then, in one of those rare moments when the fog rolled to a higher level, his eyes made out a difference in shading in the gray wall ahead—a flaking of yellow, as though a bonfire in some hollow cast a reflection upon the ceiling of fog.

The gravel pit! He began to move more warily, and as he advanced, the flicker of light grew clearer as it beat against the heavy atmosphere. The sound of a voice rose suddenly from the void ahead, chanting in a dreadful, unknown tongue.

Forewarned, Ramsay dropped to his knees and squirmed across the wet ground, snake-like on his belly. Gone was his assurance now, gone all reason; gone, too, his desire for sleep. His flesh crept at the hideous tautophony of that voice, and a horror greater than any he had ever known swept through him.

Involuntarily he closed his eyes as he crept forward, dreading the moment when the veil would be torn from his vision and he would look down upon the horror in the pit below. His groping fingers found the edge of a precipice, light flared against his closed lids and an odor rose to his nostrils—an odor of rot, of death and decay.

He pressed his face into the clean, damp earth for a long moment; then with a quick lift of his head he opened his eyes and fixed his gaze upon the scene below. A shudder passed through every limb and cold drops of sweat trickled down the sides of his face. Always and for ever the thing that was happening in the gravel pit would be etched upon his brain.

There was no bonfire as he had expected, but only the pin-point flaring of a myriad candles, burning aslant in the stifling hollow of the pit as they moved in a crawling, everlasting circle, carried backward by a multitude of black-shrouded figures. The circling candles were horrid enough, but it was the naked, obscene thing which lay in the center of the circle that set Ramsay shuddering with repugnance.

Perhaps at one time it had been a man, but so hideously and unspeakably had it been mutilated that it was now a mere heap of quivering flesh stretched upon a sacrificial block. With an effort Ramsay tore his eyes from the beastly sight and his heart gave a stifling leap as he did so.

Two figures had stepped from the obscurity beyond the circling lights. One of these was the man with the green, flat gaze. The other was Linda, white-robed and more dreadfully beautiful than he had ever seen her. About her naked shoulders the black coils of her hair moved uncannily with a strange life of their own. Her eyes were set and staring, and in her extended hands she held a small black bowl, against the edges of which trembled a murky liquid.

The man with the green eyes lifted a dark, thin hand, while the abominable voice in the background chanted on and on.

"Drink!" he commanded.

Slowly, with unseeing eyes, the woman raised the bowl to her lips, and in doing so, half turned toward the evil gaze of the man at her side.

Ramsay's voice grated from his throat in a harsh scream that he barely recognized as coming from his own lips.

"Linda!"

The woman started violently, so that

liquid spurted from the bowl in her fingers and left a spatter of scarlet against her white robe. The gaze which commanded hers wavered not at all at the cry. The man's swarthy hand was still raised in its gesture of command.

"Drink!" he repeated softly.

Again Ramsay screamed. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

The black figures in the pit ceased their backward circling for an instant and he was aware of faces tilted curiously toward him—faces he seemed to recognize—Samuels' bleared eyes and the faces of his mountain neighbors. Then the heads turned and the low sound of a dreadful laughter rose upon the night.

So they *were* in league against him—these dwellers on Loon Mountain? This, then, was their reason for refusing to recognize the dead woman? They were banded together by a dreadful alliance, sworn to oppose his search for Linda.

Was his gun impotent? Was he helpless against the malevolent power of the man in the pit below? Man—or warlock?

He raised the butt of the gun to his shoulder and rested the barrel upon the edge of the precipice. One shot only was allowed him. He dared not miss. Those below were paying no attention now, circling again in the eery light. Once more Linda had lifted the black bowl to her lips. Ramsay sighted along the barrel.

The shot crashed upon the hateful night, echoing from the side of the mountain to the valley and back again, silencing the monotony of the chanting voice. All motion in the pit ceased; all attention was fixed with incredulity upon the figure of the man within the circle of candlelight.

For a moment he stood there, staggering a little upon his feet. Then a dreadful metamorphosis began to take place—a transmutation too fearful for the eyes of man to witness. Ramsay hid his face against the damp earth, his ears tortured by the shrieking of voices and the trample of flying feet. When he dared to gaze once more into the pit below, he could see the flicker of three dying candles and the stained white robes of Linda, his wife.

Cautiously he slipped down the steep slide of earth and lifted the unconscious girl in his arms. As he did so a candle sputtered out, and in the light of the remaining two, stuck upright in the ground, he saw again the horror of that torn thing upon the slab of the sacrifice block. He pressed Linda tightly in his arms and went round the object, only to thrust one foot into a moldering obscenity that crawled below the block. He drew back with a stifled cry and in the dying candlelight he glimpsed two flat, greenish eyes that shimmered faintly from an ooze of gray and jelly-like matter.

SOMEHOW he fled back to the fog-filled world above the pit. Somehow, with Linda in his arms, he stumbled along the mountainside—past the black outline of the building, with its gaping, lamplit doorway, back to the car and the road.

Linda lay against the seat, pale to her very lips, but conscious now. As the familiar jolting along the mountainside began again, she began to talk very softly, half to herself.

"She was my sister—my twin. She knew because of the mark. Before she died she told me—everything. We were dedicated when we were born. Dedicated to—*that!* But because our mother was good, she tried to get us away from Loon Mountain. Myself they never found, but *he* caught my sister and brought her back. She didn't know what he was—no one knew—only that he was something evil

that had crept up from some dark place in the earth.

"But my sister was not obedient to the cult. In her heart she was good, like our mother who had died because of her goodness. And in the end my sister died too. They could afford to fling her over the pit once they had me to take her place."

By some instinct Ramsay kept the car to the road while he listened, until at last the fog thinned and rolled back upon the mountains. Far ahead a hint of gray light crawled up the sky.

Linda sighed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the shadow of horror had begun to fade.

"I'm free now," she went on softly. "I couldn't be free before, because he was calling me. Wherever I went, he was there—at the back of my mind—calling."

Against her bare shoulder the faintest tint of rose gave evidence of a mark that was like a tiny inverted cross. Ramsay slipped one arm about her and drew her close to him on the seat.

"Look!" he whispered, "far ahead along the sky. Dawn, my darling!"

Listening

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

The night seems to be listening
To furtive little sounds—
To halting footsteps of a ghost
That makes its stealthy rounds
Seeking the names that once it knew
That now are carved on stone
And granite shafts that etch a hill
Where grieving night winds moan.

The night seems to be listening
For voices it once knew
And loved, and carried tenderly
Through vaults of midnight blue.
A moonbeam sifts through somber pines
Whose shadows make dim caves—
A ghostly light moves softly on
Among the silent graves.

The night is listening—the wind
Goes sobbing down the years—
Dawn lights the slender shafts with dew
But Night knows they are tears.

The Metronome

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A grim little tale about a drowned child who would not stay dead

AS SHE lay in bed, with the pleasant, concealing darkness all around her, her lips were half parted in a smile that was the only expression of her relief that the funeral was over at last. And no one had suspected that she and the boy had not fallen into the river accidentally, no one had guessed that she *could* have saved her step-child if she had wanted to. "Oh, poor Mrs. Farwell, how terrible she must feel!" She could hear their words ringing faint and far away in the close-pressing darkness of the night.

What remorse she had fleetingly felt when at last the child had gone down, when he had disappeared beneath the surface of the water for the last time, and when she herself lay exhausted on the shore, had long since passed from her. She had ceased to think how she could have done it—she had even convinced herself that the river bank had caved in accidentally, that she had forgotten how weak it was there, and how deep the water below, and how swift the current.

In the next room her husband moved. He had suspected nothing. "Now I have only you," he had said to her, sorrow in the worn lines of his face. It had been difficult for her those first few days, but the definite consignment of Jimmy's body to the grave had lessened and finally dissipated the faint doubts that haunted her.

Still, thinking soberly, it was difficult for her to conceive how she could have done it. It was certainly impulsive, but irritation at the boy and hatred because of his resemblance to his mother had fostered her desire. And that metronome! At ten years a boy ought to have forgotten such childish things as a metronome. If he had played the piano and needed it to keep time—that might have been a different thing. But as it was, no, no—too much. Her nerves couldn't have stood it another day. And when she had hidden the metronome, how he had enraged her by singing that absurd little ditty which he had heard Walter Damrosch sing in explanation of the nickname *Metronome Symphony* for Beethoven's *Eighth* on one of the Friday morning children's hour programs! The words of it, those absurdly childish words which Beethoven had sent to the inventor of the metronome, ran through her mind, ringing irritatingly in the chambers of her memory.

How d'you do,
How d'you do,
How d'you do,
My dear, my dear
Mis-ter Mel-zo!

Or something like that. She could not be sure of them. They rang insistently in her memory to the second movement of the symphony, beating like the metronome, tick-tick, tick-tick, endlessly. The metronome and the song had after all crystallized her feeling for the son of Farwell's first wife.

She thrust the song from her memory.

Then abruptly she began to wonder where she had hidden the metronome. It

was rather a pretty thing, quite modern, with a heavy silver base, and a little hammer on a grooved steel rod extending upward against the background of a curved triangle of silver. She had not yielded to her first impulse to destroy it because she had thought that after the boy was gone it would make a lovely ornament, even though it had belonged to Jimmy's mother. For a moment she thought of Margot, who ought to be glad that she had sent Jimmy to his mother—provided there was a place beyond. She remembered that Margot had believed.

Could she have put the thing on one of the shelves in her closet? Perhaps. It was odd that she could not remember something which still stood out as one of her most important acts in the few days immediately preceding Jimmy's drowning. She lay thinking about it, thinking how attractive it would look on the grand piano, just that single ornament, silver against the piano's brownish black.

And then suddenly the ticking of the metronome broke into her ruminations. How odd, she thought, that it should sound just now, while her thoughts dwelt upon it! The sound came quite clearly, tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. But when she tried to ascertain its direction, she could not do so. It seemed to swell, growing louder, and fading away again, which was most unusual. She reflected that she had never known it to do that before in all the time that Jimmy had plagued her with its ticking. She became more alert, listening more intently.

Abruptly she thought of something that sent an arresting thrill coursing through her. For a moment she held her breath, suspended her faculties. Didn't she hide the metronome after Jimmy had given it to her to wind? Unless her memory failed her, she did. Then it could not now be ticking, for it had been run down, and it had not been wound up again. For a fleeting moment she wondered whether Henry had found it and wound it for a joke and set it going at this hour. She glanced at her wristwatch. A quarter of one. It required a far stretch of the imagination to believe Henry capable of such a joke. More likely he would confront her with his find and say, "Look here, I thought you told me Jimmy'd lost this, and here I find it on your shelf; he couldn't possibly have reached there." The thought reminded her that she had hidden it somewhere above Jimmy's reach.

She listened.

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. . . .

Did Henry hear that? she wondered. Probably not. He slept quite soundly always.

After a moment of hesitation, she got up, groped about in the dark for her electric candle, and went to the closet. She opened the door, thrust her hand and the candle into the yawning maw of dark, and listened. No, the metronome was not there. Yet she could not help pulling one or two hat-boxes aside to be sure. She almost always hid things there.

She withdrew from the closet and stood leaning against its closed door, her brow marred by a frown of irritation. Good heaven! was she destined to hear that infernal ticking even after Jimmy's death? She moved resolutely to the door of her room.

But suddenly a new sound struck into her consciousness.

Someone was walking about beyond the door somewhere, padding about on soft, muffled feet!

Her first thought was naturally enough of Henry, but even as the thought occurred to her she heard his bed creak. She wanted to imagine that for some

reason the maid or the cook had returned to the house, but she could not accept the absurdity of the thought of their returning for anything at one o'clock in the morning. And burglars were out of the question.

Her hand hesitated on the knob. Then she opened the door almost angrily and looked into the hall, holding the electric candle high above her. There was nothing there. She recognized instantly that she would have preferred to see someone there. How too absurd! she thought, apprehensively irritated.

At the same moment she heard the footsteps again, slight and far away now, sounding faintly from downstairs. The ticking of the metronome had become more insistent; so loud it was that for a frantic instant she was afraid it might wake Henry.

And then came a sound that flooded her being with icy terror, the sound of a little boy's voice singing in a far place,

> How d'you do,
> How d'you do,
> How d'you do,
> My dear, my dear
> Mis-ter Mel-zo!

She fell back against the door-jamb, and clung there with her free hand. Her mind was in turmoil. But in a moment the voice faded and died away, and the ticking of the metronome sounded louder than ever. She felt only relief as she heard its sound superseding that other.

She stood for a few moments pulling herself together. Then she tightened her fingers about the electric candle and went slowly along the corridor, pressing herself close to the wall. As she approached the top of the stairs she clasped her other hand about the small tube of light, so that whatever was below might not see. She descended the stairs, apprehensive lest they creak and betray her presence.

There was nothing in the hall below, but there was a sound from the library. Gently she pushed the door open, and the ticking of the metronome welled out and engulfed her. She did not at once see beyond the threshold. Only after she had stepped into the room did her eyes catch sight of the vague little shadow against the opposite wall, an indistinct thing wandering along the line of the wall, peering behind furniture, looking upward at the bookcases, reaching phantom hands into corners — Jimmy, looking for his metronome!

She stood immobile, her very breath held within her by some impending horror. Jimmy, dead Jimmy, whom she had seen buried that morning—only the strength of her will saved her from pitching forward in a faint.

On came the spectral child. Toward her it came, and past her it went, searching, prying into every nook where the metronome might be hidden. Around again and again.

With a great effort she found her voice. "Go away," she whispered harshly. "Oh, go away."

But the child did not hear. It continued its phantom quest, futilely covering the same ground it had already covered many times. And the insistent tick-tick, tick-tick of the metronome continued to sound like the strokes of a hammer in the oppressive night-haunted room.

Her hand slipped nervelessly from the tube of light just as the child passed her. She saw its face, turned up toward her, its eyes, usually so kind, now malevolent, its mouth petulant and angry, its little hands clenched.

Frantically she turned to escape, but the door would not open.

After three futile attempts to wrench it open, she looked for some obstacle to

its movement. The child was at her side, holding its hand lightly against the door, its touch enough to keep the door immovable. She tried once again. The knob turned in her hand, as before, but the door refused to budge. The expression on the child's face had become so malignant that she dropped the electric candle in sudden fright and fled toward the window directly opposite the door.

But the child was there before her.

She tried to raise the window, slipping the lock with her free hand. It would not move. Even before she looked, she felt the child's hand holding down the window. There it was, vaguely white, transparent, leaning lightly against the glass.

It was the same with the only other window the room contained. When she tried to raise her hand to break the glass, she found that the child had only to stand before the window and her hand could not even penetrate through the air to the glass.

Then she turned and slipped into the dark corner behind the grand piano, sobbing in terror.

Presently the child was at her side. She felt it emanating a ghastly cold that penetrated her thin night-clothes.

"Go away, go away," she sobbed.

She felt the child's face pressing close to her, its eyes seeking hers, its eyes accusing her, its phantom fingers reaching out to touch her.

With a wild cry of terror, she fled. Once more she made for the door, but the child was there before her hand fell upon the knob. And she knew without turning the knob that her effort was in vain. Then she tried to snap on the light, but the same influence that had prevented her from breaking the window was again at work.

Once more she sought the comparative safety of a dark corner, and again the child found her out and nuzzled close to her, like an animal seeking warmth.

Then suddenly the gates of her mind pressed inward and collapsed, and she felt a deeper, more maddening fear invading her reason. She began to beat at the enclosed walls with her clenched fists. Then she found her voice and screamed to release the malefic horror that hemmed her in.

The last thing she knew was the pulling of the child's spectral hands at her waist. Then she collapsed in a heap against the wall. Something struck her a sharp blow against the temple, and at the same instant the clammy frigidity of the child's phantom body pressed down upon her face. The waiting darkness advanced and engulfed her.

HENRY FARWELL found his wife lying against the wall near the grand piano. He came to his knees at her side. He had had enough medical training to suspect that his wife had been suffocated by something wet, for there was still a dampness on her features. He did not understand the strong smell of the river in the room. Looking upward, he saw an enormous landscape painting hanging awry above her body, but certainly this could not have made the wound in her temple.

Then abruptly he saw what had struck his wife in falling from behind the landscape, where it had been hidden. It was the metronome.

Anything Could Happen

By KURT BARLE

A strange little story with a startling climax

THE fog lay grayly in the shallow canyon of Payson Place. Now and then, caught by a sullen stray breath of the night wind, wraith-like fingers curled dismally upward about the snug windows of the substantial residences, only to vanish into the void above. The street lamps glowed dimly down on wet pavements, and the thoroughfare, save for a rare nightfarer groping through the vapor, or an occasional cab driving blindly into obscurity, was deserted.

Anything could happen. . . .

A bright fire crackling on a stolid hearth dispelled the bleakness of the evening in a room at 21 Payson Place. Obviously the quarters of a gentleman in comfortable circumstances, the furnishings of the softly lighted room were unpretentious, but in excellent taste. Bookcases, filled with rich and ponderous tomes, flanked the large windows looking out on the fog-ridden world, and countless trophies and mementoes told mute tales of former victories and bygone travels. A fine old clock beat solemnly in a darkened corner.

It was growing late; scant seconds before, this ancient clock had tolled eleven times in tired, somber tones. Scarcely had the knell faded, when a bell somewhere in the remote confines of the brownstone building began an insistent tinkling.

A door slammed, its reverberations echoing dully through the quiet study. Voices were in the hall, and two men appeared in the massive oak doorway.

"Right in here, sir. I've had your den in readiness all evening."

The younger and taller of the two glanced about him appreciatively as he took off his mist-damped apparel. "It's good to be back, Clyde!"

"It's good to have you back again, sir." The bent servant's parchment-yellow features glowed with an expression almost paternal as his faded eyes worshipped his master, Richard Stores, adventurer and vagabond. "A year is a long time," he said.

A shadow crossed the returned wanderer's face. "Yes, it is. Damned long!" He moved to the window and stood there, staring out into the fog.

Clyde coughed politely. Richard Stores whirled about, his revery broken.

"I'm sorry, Clyde. I won't need you any more tonight. One moment . . . Have the car ready at ten. I must confer with my dearly beloved uncle and the Empire's most esteemed statesman as soon as possible."

There was something bitter about his statement, something strangely acid, which caused the servant to stare in concern. He shot a quizzical gaze at his master, but Richard Stores' face was expressionless.

"Yes, sir—at ten." He moved to the door. "Shall I send Duke in? I believe he senses your return. I've had the very devil of a time with him tonight, if I may say so."

"Duke! Of course, send him in. For the moment, I'd forgotten. . . ."

"Good-night, sir."

RICHARD STORES moved back into the circle of light shed by a small lamp, packed his pipe, and dropped wearily into a chair. The yellow rays of the lamp and the intermittent flare of the fire sharply outlined features that were clean and hard, but unnaturally old; a countenance on which suffering had left an indelible imprint. Too, there was something else engraved about the gray-blue eyes and the bold cast of his jaw; something undefinable, perhaps a haunting, nameless fear.

He lighted his pipe, and the fine, powerful hand which held the lighter seemed to tremble.

Suddenly a joyful, full-throated bark disturbed the quiet. Through the door sprang a superb animal, a dog of uncertain breed but massive proportions. Stores laughed, and the dog leaped into the outstretched arms.

"Duke! Duke, you old devil!"

For a time the man played with him, talked to him, caressed the intelligent head. They were staunch friends, these two. Man and beast, they had unquestioningly shared privation and danger in the quest for high adventure.

But this latest, longest mission had required a change of method. Duke had been left behind.

The clock tolled the half-hour, and Stores' animation faded. He stroked the dog abstractedly. Occasionally, alien noises from the great metropolis resting dankly beneath the blanket of fog penetrated the fastness of the room, and then the everlasting, slow beats of the clock made the only break in the almost oppressive stillness. He closed his eyes, and smoke from his pipe drifted regretfully upward. . . .

"Clyde is right, Duke—a year is a long time. Long enough to make one afraid, horribly afraid." He spoke softly, musingly. "God, the utter loneliness! Man is a social animal, Duke. I've spent a year in hell; it might have been twenty. But I succeeded"—unconsciously his hand strayed to a coat pocket—"treaties, Duke . . . damnable things. Dynamite. . . ."

Dynamite! Worse than that: work of Satan. A year of his life torn from him for that. Tramping weeks, months alone under a burning sun through the slime and filth of the fever-infested lowlands. Following new trails; running down fresh clues; always new disappointments. Then, after nine months of grueling search, he had come on them. There had been a pitched battle; Richard Stores was no weakling. One man lay there, lower jaw almost severed by a slash of the machete, his split tongue lolling grotesquely amid yellow and broken teeth, and blood; but the packet was there.

Then the dread fever, and with it, madness. Delirium, visions. Sir Henry stood on the sandbar. "Burn them! Destroy! Fool!" But he had dug his clenched hands into the sand, and there had been grit and filth in his mouth. Then one night Sir Henry faded into the river.

Queer brown men regarded him; a witch-doctor gyrated about him, moaning incantations. Weeks later they had taken him to the coast.

A month's trip in an evil-smelling, sluggish freighter. One night he had rushed to the rail, the yellowed packet in his upraised hand, and abysmal fear and loathing in his heart. Jeering laughter had come from the forecastle, and something about his soul had snapped. He lowered the arm, determination oozing from him. Staggering to his quarters, he cursed himself, the heavy envelope like lead in his pocket.

And now he was home. . . .

". . . They'll plunge the world into an

annihilating war, Duke. Perhaps I should have destroyed them. But I'll keep my part of the bargain. I'm turning them over to Sir Henry in the morning. He and his scheming band of diplomats will have more than they bargained for, I'm afraid.

"Come what may, we'll forget this infernal business, Duke. We'll go to the continent. What about it, you handsome brute?"

The dog growled his willingness, and Stores laughed. Master and dog understood each other. He nodded, and both dozed under the lamp.

He awoke with a start. There it was again; again the bell had rung. He looked at the clock, ticking eternally in the dim corner. After midnight. The fire had suddenly gone cold; nothing remained but a heap of dying embers. And Duke was acting queerly. Usually alert and aggressive, the dog was slinking back into a corner. Stores moved to the door.

Someone was coming down the hall.

Duke whined.

"Uncle!" Richard Stores stepped back in surprize.

Sir Henry made no reply, but moved quickly to the window. A slender, dynamic old man garbed in a disheveled topcoat on which moisture gleamed in sparkling abandon, he twined his emaciated hands together nervously, glanced swiftly at the clock, and hurried back to his nephew.

"The packet!" he said imperatively, and made an impatient gesture as Stores stared. "Don't stand there like a fool. Hurry!"

Richard Stores fumbled in his clothing, and gave the yellowed envelope to the old statesman. The latter pounced on it, tore it open, rapidly ran his bright eyes over the contents. Then he sighed approvingly.

"It's all here, thank God. A match, quick! A match!"

The younger Stores handed his lighter over mechanically. Trembling hands seized it while Duke moaned in the darkness.

"You're mad!"

The flaming paper flashed in the ashtray, casting a ruddy glow over the glassy, pale face of the visitor. Blackened paper gleamed redly a moment, curling and twisting like an imp in torment; then the last spark died away.

Silence; silence broken only by the beat of the clock and the whine of the cowering Duke. Richard Stores looked mutely askance at the Empire's most publicized notable. The work of one hellish, precious year was ashes.

He noted a new expression on the old man's face—something ethereally serene and peaceful. And suddenly Richard Stores saw something else, something that made the back of his neck tingle.

A tuft of silver hair had strayed from under the black hat, and there was a stain on the strand—a dark, ominous, spreading stain. Even as his startled eyes beheld it, another scarlet drop fell to the floor.

"My God, you're hurt!" he exclaimed, and sprang forward.

The sudden, furious passion in the old man's voice seemed to root him in mid-air. "Go back! Don't touch me! Don't touch me, do you hear?" As suddenly as it had come his fury died, and he continued:

"Forgive me, Richard. I can't explain. There isn't time . . . time. . . ." The withered statesman seemed to ponder the word for a moment; then: "And I'm tired, so tired."

He talked on.

"I found out the significance—the full

significance of the packet only a few months ago. Since Wykoff confessed, Richard, I've led a tormented, tortured existence. We at the Home Office suspect many things, but this—dear Lord!—this was damnable. I sent you, Richard—I—and the blood of millions would have been on my head—and I'm an old man. I hoped and prayed you'd destroy the thing. There is no other way; Armstrong would have made war a certainty—he and the munitions trust.

"But now the deed is done. I can face my Maker calmly, Richard, quite calmly, with no regrets. Nothing else matters."

The aged head drooped. Wearily he pulled his collar closer about him and moved to the door, and Richard Stores was suddenly conscious of an abiding, tender reverence for the venerable helmsman who had so long guided the destiny of a nation. But then:

"Uncle," he cried. "Your forehead. Blood——"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I must go——" The voice faded.

Stores moved to forcibly prevent his aged relative's leaving, when an awful howl behind him made him twist about. Duke was poised with his forefeet on the window-ledge, his head lifted to the fog-obscured sky. He bayed again, a deep, mournful, haunting howl. Perspiration gathered on Stores' brow. Only once before had he heard Duke howl like that—when Stores' father had died some years before. Instinctively he turned to his visitor.

He was alone with Duke.

Frantically he rushed out into the hall. He called; the echoes mocked him. The street door hung on its hinges, and the fog was creeping in. For a moment he stood out on the clammy steps, fighting fruitlessly against the horrible fear that was slowly, surely insinuating itself about his soul. Nobody. He turned back into the house, closed the door, and sought the sanctuary of his study. Helplessly he dropped into the chair, head in hands. Richard Stores, adventurer, vagabond, gentleman of leisure, was trembling.

The increasing chill in the room and the clock sounding the hour of one brought him back to clearer thinking.

Why had Sir Henry acted so queerly? His uncle was a bit of an eccentric, Stores knew that. His eccentricities had been the joke of the diplomatic staff for years. And he could understand his concern about the treaties.

But the blood on his forehead? Had he imagined that? Perhaps an illusion caused by the dim light? Well, there was one way of finding out.

He turned the switch and flooded the room. Going over to the spot where he had seen the drops fall, he surveyed the rug carefully. Thank God! no sign; no stain. His imagination again.

Relieved, he pulled out his tobacco and filled his pipe. Holding the lighter to the briar bowl, he paused. Something was wrong. Pondering, his eye fell on the ash-tray, and his face lost its color.

The tray in which he had seen the burning packet was empty. Not an iota, not a trace of charred paper.

"HULLO, Richard," came a quiet voice from the doorway. "Pardon my walking in on you like this, but the latch was off, and I knew you were home."

The man in the chair looked up dazedly. It was Amos Wentworth. Wentworth, middle-aged and stout, had been a friend of the family for years, and served in a lawyer's capacity as manager of the huge estate.

"Sorry to bother you at this late hour, but my visit was necessary." He paused

uncertainly. "I'm afraid I have some bad news——"

The eyes of Richard Stores were fixed on the lawyer's face. Wentworth continued:

"The fog . . . your uncle's car . . . hit by the Express . . . dreadful. He is dead, Richard."

The man in the chair clenched his hands spasmodically. Then:

"When?"

"About eleven-thirty this evening, Richard. Death was instantaneous. A fractured skull. . . ."

Outside, the fog still lay grayly in the shallow canyon of Payson Place. . . .

The Dinner Set

By FANNY KEMBLE JOHNSON

A story of the strange doom that wreaked havoc upon everyone who acquired the set of china

"YES," said the visiting civil engineer, "that was queer; but what do you think of this?"

He liked to give a story a literary turn, and, not knowing his weakness, his club members were surprized when he began:

"Señorita Paquita passionately desired this set of china. It happened to fulfill a need of her nature. She adored the little more added to the usual. About all of her possessions there was a touch which inevitably caused her acquaintances to exclaim in derision, wonder, or envy.

"Now this set of china had more, much more. For one thing, it was a huge set, dozens of everything. There was even a child's set for a doll table. It was as complete as that. It thought of everything, and it was so beautiful, a sumptuous original design, created for a South American potentate who had been assassinated before he could pay for it.

"I do not know how it came to rest at a reduced valuation in a foreign shop in La Paz; but there it was. Even reduced, the price was pretty stiff for anyone not really enthusiastic; but the *señorita* was that all right.

"She used to go to gaze at it, and there she would stand, counting, pondering, planning to buy, and the dealer would look her way, and blink and smile. Under that lacquered poll he well knew that he would sometime sell her his Chinese white elephant and get his long-delayed profits.

" 'Now what would you make that out to be, *Señor?*' she asked me one morning, noticing me at her elbow bent on some gift-buying for my niece in the States.

"I stooped my head to see what she meant.

"Then I first perceived that the china was strangely patterned. It was as if the designer had wandered in an equatorial jungle world, marvelous and monstrous, and had every so often cut a plate, or a platter, or a cup, or a jug, or a bowl out of it. Can you get my meaning? A plate would be leaves all over and a third of it a great flower, or there would be a tremendous moth or butterfly, or over the

edge of a single tropical leaf you glimpsed the rolling of an immense river, or another piece would merely be an intense blue and brightness of night and stars, or the brilliant wing-tip of a bird, no room for more. But each had one feature in common, one feature which made the dishes a set and not just a collection of unrelated pieces.

"On each piece there was a black and extremely strange figure. It did not appear as if actually meant for a definite object, or if it was, it was meant for something outside of my human experience. If you examined it minutely it became blurred. It all but vanished. It lurked, you could say. It became less a shape than a darkness into which you peered and feared to fall, if you were fanciful. But on other pieces it lurked in another fashion. On the doll dishes I could have sworn the blackness glittered and slid.

" 'It doesn't really seem to be anything at all,' I told her presently. 'I fancy it's merely an artistic trick. That bit of black contrasts very effectively with all that gorgeousness, you see.'

"She accepted my explanation with satisfaction. She loved to walk a plain path.

"Soon I heard that she had bought the china. In fact I saw it being carried to her in a gigantic basket by the owner of the shop and his brother. Their yellow faces grinned at me. I offered my congratulations, and, aside from having got rid of an all but unsalable burden, they struck me as looking remarkably relieved and satisfied.

"IT WAS a sad thing—the poor *señorita*—she never got to use her beautiful china, after all. She died of acute indigestion that very night, and the set was almost immediately offered for sale by her brother and heir. He had no use for it and it had been an incredible extravagance on his sister's part.

"It tempted a young wife, an exquisite creature whose husband could refuse her nothing, especially since she would soon become a mother. She also adored the doll dishes but that was because she could look ahead and behold a little girl setting a doll table.

"She stored the set away until some special occasion.

"On her husband's birthday it arrived, and, since this was to be her last festivity pending the baby's birth, she herself laid the table for the birthday guests. As she stood admiring the long festal board, she bethought her of the doll dishes, and smiling and playful set them out also on a tea table, a cover of lace beneath them, and tiny candles at each table corner.

"When her husband entered and joined her in admiring it, she said she was a trifle tired and would lie down for an hour before dressing. Somewhat later he went to her and found her to be in pain. She was taken to the hospital, where that night the child, a girl, was born dead, and where, two weeks later, the young mother died of an infection.

"A legend began to gather around the set of china. No one desired it for a long period; but finally a rich American, lured by the again greatly lowered price, bought it as a gift for his wife."

"I know," interrupted the man opposite, rudely; "the woman died next day."

"It is true," said the civil engineer tolerantly, "that she was all but drowned in a steamboat disaster on Lake Titicaca within a few days of her husband's unfortunate purchase. But he had sense, that man. It was plain to be seen, he said, that the set of china was hoodooed, and anyone liking to risk it, could have the cursed stuff for a nickel.

"There was an Englishwoman, wife of my superior, a beautiful, healthy, sensible creature of thirty-six or so, who mocked at all superstition. She said she would give him ten pounds for it, and he gladly sent it to her that very day. He wanted to make her a present of it, but she preferred it to be a business transaction. She said scoffingly that she would rather buy her bad luck than have it for a present.

"She had never been ill a day in her life except when her babies arrived, and that she did not count; but about a week later, as she sat gayly having tea with her best friend, and her own eldest daughter and that daughter's fiancé, she had all at once the most terrible sensation.

" 'I am dying,' she said with entire conviction.

"As they carried her to a couch in the room she had a hemorrhage. Luckily the seventeen-year-old girl had enough sense to use an ice-pack until a doctor could be had.

"She lay ill for months, as near death as one could be not to die.

"Every now and then she would say to her daughter, who became her nurse, having developed a fine talent in that direction, instantly recognized by the doctor—every now and then she would say, faintly smiling:

" 'Do not let any of my beautiful china get smashed, Iris.'

"Iris was afraid to cross her mother in the least way; but she said to the nice youngster she meant to marry some day:

" 'I hate it, oh, how I hate it!'

" 'You don't——' he began, and stopped. It was so evident that she did. 'And you an English girl!'

"Iris looked at him obstinately.

" 'You never had a native nurse who took you through a graveyard uprooted by an earthquake. You never played with a witch-woman's children as a treat. You never saw a dead girl propped up against a window, trimmed like a Christmas tree in all the family finery, on the chance that her unfaithful lover might come by and she come alive long enough to strangle him. What do you know about anything in this country, you silly English boy?'

"Brooks deplored this mature flood of speech in one so young.

" 'I know that you ought to have been sent to school in England!' he cried fervently.

" 'My mother is dying,' said Iris, 'and I know what I'm going to do about it.'

"But the young man had no idea what she meant until he caught her doing it the very next evening.

"Her mother had been lower than ever that day, and Brooks had been sitting on the veranda rail for an hour, waiting until Iris could find a moment for him. He was just thinking that he might as well get along, and try his luck later, when a faintly echoing crash reached his ears. He thought nothing of one crash; but when it was followed by a second and a third, he investigated.

"THE grounds behind the bungalow ran down the hill for some distance and were bounded by a stone wall with a blue wooden door in it. This door stood open, and it was from the other side of the wall that the crashes were continuing to come, quite loudly and clearly now. Still Brooks never thought of what they might be, but walked carelessly on and peered through the blue doorway.

" 'At least you might come and help me,' said Iris in a sobbing voice.

"Then he saw that she stood in front of two great clothes-hampers of glittering dishes.

" 'You can start on the other hamper,' said Iris.

"These two young English persons—for Brooks was so wrought up by the unreasoning grief of his sweetheart that he found himself smashing with a cold fury equaling hers—stood there and broke a thousand dollars' worth of china, in about thirty minutes. He told me it seemed as if living shapes struck against the wall; but I always discounted that. After all, he was young and excited. They broke even the last little doll plate, and by that time it was night.

"They went inside, and Brooks closed the blue door very carefully and locked it very particularly before he turned to kiss Iris' tear-marked face. As they stood clasped, suddenly Iris broke from him and ran into the house as if she had heard a call. He followed her to the sickroom where she was standing by her mother, who had certainly appeared to be dying an hour earlier.

"The German doctor stood by the bed too, smiling and patting Iris on the back heavily.

" 'It was time she took that turn for the better,' he said loudly.

"Iris' mother did not look any better to Brooks; but he understood presently that what seemed to him so much like the sleep of death was really the natural and invigorating sleep of life.

"And indeed it turned out to be all of that, for within a month the Englishwoman was as well as ever.

"On the day her husband was expected home from his bridge-building in the Andes, she said:

" 'We'll use our beautiful dishes this evening.'

"She spoke to Iris, who burst into tears and looked at Brooks.

"He rose to the occasion. He even swore that he had persuaded Iris to do it.

" 'You broke my beautiful, my wonderful dishes! You pair of superstitious——' Words did not fail her, but she was too self-controlled to continue.

" 'We did it to save your life,' mumbled Iris, her face obscured by a pink linen sleeve.

"Her mother opened her mouth, but closed it without speaking. Only her look inquired:

" 'What on earth have I raised to young womanhood?'

"Brooks defended his love.

" 'Then why didn't you send her home to England? What else could you look for in a girl brought up in this country?'

" 'Oh, I thought you put it in her head,' countered his future mother-in-law. She turned and left them, speaking to herself in a tone of indescribable exasperation:

" 'I do believe the idiots think that is why I got well.' "

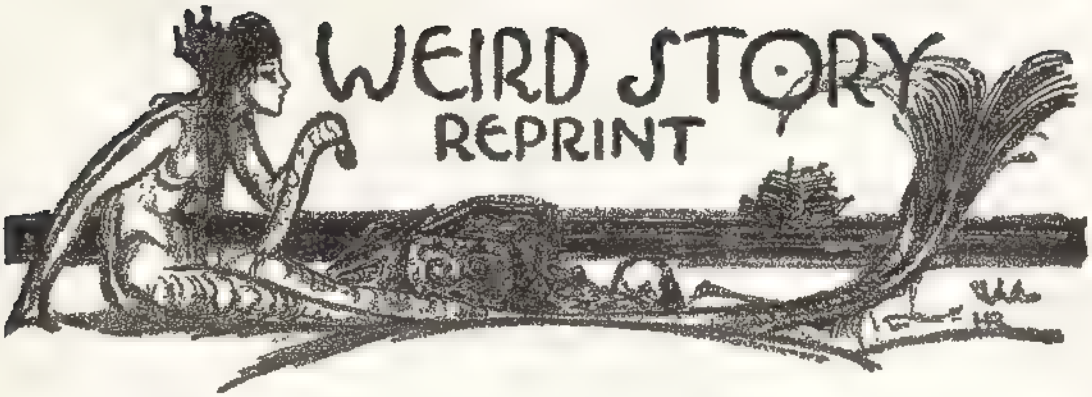
THE visitor collected eyes—some speculative, others entertained.

A man asked: "Well, *was* it?"

The story-teller rose, looked at the time and moved toward the door.

"*I* don't know," he said. "*I* was not the disinterested observer—because, you see, it happened to *my* wife."

He departed with a courteous handwave, and an enigmatic smile.



The Fireplace*

By HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

WHEN the Planter's Hotel in Jackson, Mississippi, burned to the ground in the notable fire of 1922, the loss to that section of the South could not be measured in terms of that ancient hostelry's former grandeur. The days had indeed long passed when a Virginia ham was therein stewed in no medium meaner than good white wine; and as the rambling old building was heavily insured, the owners suffered no great material loss. The real loss was the community's, in the deaths by fire of two of its prominent citizens, Lieutenant-Governor Frank Stacpoole and Mayor Cassius L. Turner. These gentlemen, just turning elderly, had been having a reunion in the hotel with two of their old associates, Judge Varney J. Baker of Memphis, Tennessee, and the Honorable Valdemar Peale, a prominent Georgian, from Atlanta. Thus, two other Southern cities had a share in the mourning, for Judge Baker and Mr. Peale both likewise perished in the flames. The fire took place just before Christmas, on the twenty-third of December, and among the many sympathetic and regretful comments which ensued upon this holocaust was the many-times-repeated conjecture that these gentlemen had been keeping a kind of Christmas anniversary, a fact which added no little to the general feeling of regret and horror.

On the request of these prominent gentlemen, the hotel management had cleared out and furnished a second-floor room with a great fireplace, a room for long used only for storage, but for which, the late mayor and lieutenant-governor had assured them, the four old cronies cherished a certain sentiment. The fire, which gained headway despite the truly desperate efforts of the occupants of the room, had its origin in the fireplace, and it was believed that the four, who were literally burned to cinders, had been trapped. The fire had started, it appeared, about half an hour before midnight, when everybody else in the hotel had retired. No other occupant of the house suffered from its effects, beyond a few incidental injuries sustained in the hurried departure at dead of night from the blazing old firetrap.

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1925.

Some ten years before this regrettable incident ended the long and honorable career of this one-time famous hostelry, a certain Mr. James Callender, breaking a wearisome journey north at Jackson, turned into the hospitable vestibule of the Planter's, with a sigh of relief. He had been shut up for nine hours in the mephitic atmosphere of a soft-coal train. He was tired, hungry, thirsty, and begrimed with soot.

Two grinning negro porters deposited his ample luggage, toted from the railway station in the reasonable hope of a large emolument, promised by their patron's prosperous appearance and the imminence of the festival season of Christmas. They received their reward and left Mr. Callender in the act of signing the hotel register.

"Can you let me have number 28?" he inquired of the clerk. "That, I believe, is the room with the large fireplace, is it not? My friend, Mr. Tom Culbertson of Sweetbriar, recommended it to me in case I should be stopping here."

Number 28 was fortunately vacant, and the new guest was shortly in occupation, a great fire, at his orders, roaring up the chimney, and he himself engaged in preparing for the luxury of a hot bath.

After a leisurely dinner of the sort for which the old hotel was famous, Mr. Callender first sauntered slowly through the lobby, enjoying the first fragrant whiffs of a good cigar. Then, seeing no familiar face which gave promise of a conversation, he ascended to his room, replenished the fire, and got himself ready for a solitary evening. Soon, in pajamas, bathrobe, and comfortable slippers, he settled himself in a comfortable chair at just the right distance from the fire and began to read a new book which he had brought with him. His dinner had been a late one and it was about half-past nine when he really settled to his book. It was Arthur Machen's *House of Souls,* and Mr. Callender soon found himself absorbed in the eery ecstasy of reading for the first time a remarkable work which transcended all his previous second-hand experiences of the occult. It had, he found, anything but a soporific effect upon him. He was reading carefully, well into the book, with all his faculties alert, when he was interrupted by a knock on the door of his room.

Mr. Callender stopped reading, marked his place, and rose to open the door. He was wondering who should summon him at such an hour. He glanced at his watch on the bureau in passing and was surprized to note that it was eleven-twenty. He had been reading for nearly two hours, steadily. He opened the door, and was surprized to find no one in the corridor. He stepped through the doorway and glanced right and then left. There were, he observed, turns in both directions at short distances from his door, and Mr. Callender, whose mind was trained in the sifting of evidence, worked out an instantaneous explanation in his mind. The occupant of a double room (so he guessed) had returned late, and, mistaking the room, had knocked to apprise his fellow occupant of his return. Seeing at once that he had knocked prematurely, on the wrong door, the person had bolted around one of the corners to avoid an awkward explanation.

Mr. Callender, smiling at this whimsical idea of his, turned back into his room and shut the door behind him.

A gentleman was sitting in the place he had vacated. Mr. Callender stopped short and stared at this intruder. The man who had appropriated his comfortable chair was a few years older than himself, it appeared—say about thirty-five. He was tall, well proportioned, and very

well dressed, although there seemed to Mr. Callender's hasty scrutiny something indefinably odd about his clothes.

The two men looked at each other appraisingly for the space of a few seconds, in silence, and then abruptly Mr. Callender saw what was wrong with the other's appearance. He was dressed in the fashion of about fifteen years back, in the style of the late nineties. No one was wearing such a decisive-looking piccadilly collar, nor such a huge puff tie which concealed every vestige of the linen except the edges of the cuffs. These, on Mr. Callender's uninvited guest, were immaculate and round, and held in place by a pair of large, round, cut-cameo black buttons.

The strange gentleman, without rising, broke the silence in a well-modulated voice with a deprecatory wave of a very well-kept hand.

"I owe you an apology, sir. I trust that you will accept what amends I can make. This room has for me a peculiar interest which you will understand if you will allow me to speak further, but for the present I confine myself to asking your pardon."

This speech was delivered in so frank and pleasing a fashion that Mr. Callender could take no offense at the intrusion of the speaker.

"You are quite welcome, sir, but perhaps you will be good enough to continue, as you suggest. I confess to being mightily puzzled as to the precise manner in which you came to be here. The only way to approach is through the door, and I'll take my oath no one came through it. I heard a knock, went to the door, and there was no one there."

"I imagine I would do well to begin at the beginning," said the stranger, gravely. "The facts are somewhat unusual, as you will see when I have related them; otherwise I should hardly be here, at this time of night, and trespassing upon your good nature. That this is no mere prank I beg that you will believe."

"Proceed, sir, by all means," returned Mr. Callender, his curiosity aroused and keen. He drew up another chair and seated himself on the side of the fireplace opposite the stranger, who at once began his explanation.

"My name is Charles Bellinger, a fact which I will ask you kindly to note and keep well in mind. I come from Biloxi, down on the Gulf, and, unlike yourself, I am a Southerner, a native of Mississippi. You see, sir, I know something about you, or at least who you are."

Mr. Callender inclined his head, and the stranger waved his hand again, this time as if to express acknowledgment of an introduction.

"I may as well add to this, since it explains several matters, though in itself sounding somewhat odd, that actually I am dead."

Mr. Bellinger, at this astounding statement, met Mr. Callender's facial expression of amazement with a smile clearly meant to be reassuring, and again, with a kind of unspoken eloquence, waved his expressive hand.

"Yes, sir, what I tell you is the plain truth. I passed out of this life in this room where we are sitting, almost exactly sixteen years ago. My death occurred on the twenty-third of December. That will be precisely sixteen years ago the day after tomorrow. I came here tonight for the express purpose of telling you the facts, if you will bear with me and suspend your judgment as to my sanity. It was I who knocked at your door, and I passed through it, and, so to speak, through you, my dear sir!

"On the late afternoon of the day I have mentioned I arrived in this hotel in

company with Mr. Frank Stacpoole, an acquaintance, who still lives here in Jackson. I met him as I got off the train, and invited him to come here with me for dinner. Being a bachelor, he made no difficulty, and just after dinner we met in the lobby another man, named Turner—Cassius L. Turner, also a Jacksonian—who proposed a game of cards and offered to secure two more gentlemen to complete the party. I invited him to bring them here to my room, and Stacpoole and I came up in advance to get things ready for an evening of poker.

"Shortly afterward Mr. Turner and the two other gentlemen arrived. One of them was named Baker, the other was Mr. Valdemar Peale, of Atlanta, Georgia. You recognize his name, I perceive, as I had expected you would. Mr. Peale is now a very prominent man. He has gone far since that time. If you happened to be better acquainted here you would know that Stacpoole and Turner are also men of very considerable prominence. Baker, who lives in Memphis, Tennessee, is likewise a well-known man in his community and state.

"Peale, it appeared, was Stacpoole's brother-in-law, a fact which I had not previously known, and all four were well acquainted with each other. I was introduced to the two newcomers and we commenced to play poker.

"Somewhat to my embarrassment, since I was both the host and the 'stranger' of the party, I won steadily from the very beginning. Mr. Peale was the heaviest loser, and although as the evening wore on he sat with compressed lips and made no comment, it was plain that he was taking his considerable losses rather hardly.

"Not long after eleven o'clock a most unfortunate incident took place. I had in no way suspected that I was not among gentlemen. I had begun, you see, by knowing only Stacpoole, and even with him my acquaintance was only casual.

"At the time I mention there began a round of jack-pots, and the second of these I opened with a pair of kings and a pair of fours. Hoping to better my hand I discarded the fours, with the odd card, and drew to the pair of kings, hoping for a third. I was fortunate. I obtained not only the third king but with it a pair of eights. Thus, equipped with a full house, I considered my hand likely to be the best, and when, within two rounds of betting, the rest had laid down their hands, the pot lay between Peale and me. Peale, I noticed, had also thrown down three cards, and every chance indicated that I had him beaten. I forced him to call me after a long series of raises back and forth: and when he laid down his hand he was holding four fours!

"You see? He had picked up my discard.

"Wishing to give Peale the benefit of any possible doubt, I declared the matter at once, for one does not lightly accuse a gentleman of cheating at cards, especially here in the South. It was possible, though far from likely, that there had been a mistake. The dealer might for once have laid down his draw on the table, although he had consistently handed out the cards as we dealt in turn all the evening. To imply further that I regarded the matter as nothing worse than a mistake, I offered at once to allow the considerable pot, which I had really won, to lie over to the next hand.

"I had risen slightly out of my chair as I spoke, and before anyone could add a word, Peale leaned over the table and stabbed me with a bowie knife which I had not even seen him draw, so rapid was his action. He struck upward, slantingly, and the blade, entering my body just

below the ribs, cut my right lung nearly in two. I sank down limp across the table, and within a few seconds had coughed myself almost noiselessly to death.

"The actual moment of dissolution was painful to a degree. It was as if the permanent part of me, 'myself'—my soul, if you will—snapped abruptly away from that distorted thing which sprawled prone across the disordered table and which no longer moved.

"Dispassionately, then, the something which continued to be myself (though now, of course, dissociated from what had been my vehicle of expression, my body) looked on and apprehended all that followed.

"For a few moments there was utter silence. Then Turner, in a hoarse, constrained voice, whispered to Peale: 'You've done for yourself now, you unmentionable fool!'

"Peale sat in silence, the knife, which he had automatically withdrawn from the wound, still grasped in his hand, and what had been my life's blood slowly dripping from it and gradually congealing as it fell upon a disarranged pile of cards.

"Then, quite without warning, Baker took charge of the situation. He had kept very quiet and played a very conservative game throughout the evening.

" 'This affair calls for careful handling,' he drawled, 'and if you will take my advice I think it can be made into a simple case of disappearance. Bellinger comes from Biloxi. He is not well known here.' Then, rising and gathering the attention of the others, he continued: 'I am going down to the hotel kitchen for a short time. While I am gone, keep the door shut, keep quiet, and clear up the room, leaving *this* (he indicated my body) where it lies. You, Stacpoole, arrange the furniture in the room as nearly as you can remember how it looked when you first came in. You, Turner, make up a big fire. You needn't begin that just yet,' he threw at Peale, who had begun nervously to cleanse the blade of his knife on a piece of newspaper; and with this cryptic remark he disappeared through the door and was gone.

"The others, who all appeared somewhat dazed, set about their appointed tasks silently. Peale, who seemed unable to leave the vicinity of the table, at which he kept throwing glances, straightened up the chairs, replaced them where they had been, and then gathered up the cards and other debris from the table, and threw these into the now blazing fire which Turner was rapidly feeding with fresh wood.

"Within a few minutes Baker returned as unobtrusively as he had left, and after carefully fastening the door and approaching the table, gathered the three others about him and produced from under his coat an awkward and hastily wrapped package of newspapers. Unfastening this he produced three heavy kitchen knives.

"I saw that Turner went white as Baker's idea dawned upon his consciousness. I now understood what Baker had meant when he told Peale to defer the cleansing of his bowie-knife. It was, as plans go, a very practical scheme which he had evolved. The body—the *corpus delicti*, as I believe you gentlemen of the law call it—was an extremely awkward fact. It was a fact which had to be accounted for, unless—well, Baker had clearly perceived that *there must be no corpus delicti!*

"He held a hurried, low-voiced conversation with the others, from the immediate effect of which all, even Peale, at first drew back. I need not detail it to you. You will have already apprehended what

Baker had in mind. There was the roaring fire in the fireplace. That was his means of making certain that there would remain no *corpus delicti* in that room when the others left. Without such evidence, that is, the actual body of the murdered man, there could be, as you are of course well aware, no prosecution, because there would be no proof that the murder had even been committed. I should simply have 'disappeared'. He had seen all that, and the opportunity which the fireplace afforded for carrying out his plan, all at once. But the fireplace, while large, was not large enough to accommodate the body of a man intact. Hence his hurried and stealthy visit to the hotel kitchen.

"The men looked up from their conference. Peale was trembling palpably. The sweat streamed from Turner's face. Stacpoole seemed unaffected, but I did not fail to observe that the hand which he reached out for one of the great meat-knives shook violently, and that he was the first to turn his head aside when Baker, himself pale and with set face, gingerly picked up from the table one of the stiffening hands. . . .

"WITHIN an hour and a quarter (for the fireplace drew as well then as it does tonight) there was not a vestige left of the *corpus delicti*, except the teeth.

"Baker appeared to think of everything. When the fire had pretty well burned itself out, and consumed what had been placed within it piece-meal, he remade it, and within its heart placed such charred remnants of the bones as had not been completely incinerated the first time. Eventually all the incriminating evidence had been consumed. It was as if I had never existed!

"My clothes, of course, had been burned. When the four, now haggard with their ordeal, had completed the burning process, another clearing-up and final re-arrangement of the room was undertaken. Various newspapers which they had been carrying in their coat pockets were used to cleanse the table. The knives, including Peale's, were washed and scrubbed, the water poured out and the wash-basin thoroughly scoured.

"My not inconsiderable winnings, as well as the coin and currency which had been in my possession, were then cold-bloodedly divided among these four rascals, for such I had for some time now recognized them as being. There arose then the problem of the disposal of my other belongings. There were my watch, pocket-knife, and several old seals which had belonged to my grandfather and which I had been accustomed to wear on the end of the chain in the pocket opposite that in which I carried my watch. There were my studs, scarf-pin, cuff-buttons, two rings, and lastly, my teeth. These had been laid aside at the time when Baker had carefully raked the charred but indestructible teeth out of the embers of the first fire."

At this point in his narrative, Mr. Bellinger paused and passed one of his eloquent hands through the hair on top of his head in a reflective gesture. Mr. Callender observed what he had not before clearly noted, that his guest possessed a pair of extraordinarily long, thin hands, very muscular, the hands of an artist and also of a man of determination and action. He particularly observed that the index fingers were almost if not quite as long as the middle fingers. The listener, who had been unable to make up his mind upon the question of the sanity of him who had presented this extraordinary narrative in so calm and convincing a fashion, viewed these hands indicative of so strong a character with the greatest interest.

Mr. Bellinger resumed his narrative.

"There was some discussion about the disposal of all these things. The consensus was that they must be concealed, since they could not easily be destroyed. If I had been one of those men I should have insisted upon throwing them into the river at the earliest opportunity. They could have been carried out of the room by any one of the group with the greatest ease and with no chance of detection, since all together they took up very little room, but this simple plan seemed not to occur to them. Perhaps they had exhausted their ingenuity in the horrible task just finished and were over-anxious to depart. They decided only upon the necessity of disposal of these trinkets, and the actual disposition was haphazard. This was by a method which I need not describe because I think it desirable to show them to you."

MR. BELLINGER rose and led the way to a corner of the room, closely followed by the amazed Callender. Bellinger pointed to the precise corner.

"Although I am for the present materialized," he remarked, "you will probably understand that this whole proceeding is in the nature of a severe psychic strain upon me and my resources. It is quite out of the question for me to do certain things. Managing to knock at the door took it out of me, rather, but I wished to give you as much warning of my presence as I could. Will you kindly oblige me by lifting the carpet at this point?"

Mr. Callender worked his fingers nervously under the corner of the carpet, and pulled. The tacks yielded after several hard pulls, and the corner of the carpet came up, revealing a large piece of heavy tin which had been tacked down over an ancient rat-hole.

"Pull up the tin, too, if you please," requested Mr. Bellinger.

The tin presented a more difficult task than had the carpet, but Mr. Callender, now thoroughly intrigued, made short work of it, though at the expense of two blades of his pocket-knife. At Mr. Bellinger's further direction, inserting his hand, he found and drew out a packet of cloth, which proved on examination to have been fabricated out of a trousers pocket lining. The cloth was rotted and brittle, and Mr. Callender carried it carefully over to the table and laid it down, and, emptying it out between them, checked off the various articles which Mr. Bellinger had named. The round cuff-buttons came last, and as he held these in his hand, he looked at Mr. Bellinger's wrists. Mr. Bellinger smiled and pulled down his cuffs, holding out his hands in the process, and Mr. Callender again noted carefully their peculiarities, the long, muscular fingers being especially conspicuous, thus seen under the direct light of the electric lamp. The cuff-buttons, he noted, were absolutely identical.

"Perhaps you will oblige me by putting the whole collection in your pocket," suggested Mr. Bellinger. Then, smiling, as Mr. Callender, not unnaturally, hesitated: "Take them, my dear man, take them freely. They're really mine to give, you know!"

Mr. Callender stepped over to the wardrobe where his clothes hung, and placed the packet in his coat pocket. When he returned to the vicinity of the fireplace, his guest had already resumed his seat.

"I trust," he said, "that despite the very singular—I may say, *bizarre*—character of my narrative and especially the statement with which I thought best to begin it, you will have given me your credence. It is uncommon to be confronted with the recital of such an experience as I have related to you, and it is not

everybody who is—may I say privileged?—to carry on an extended conversation with a man who has been dead sixteen years!

"My object may possibly have suggested itself to you. These men have escaped all consequences of their act. They are, as I think you will not deny, four thorough rascals. They are at large and even in positions of responsibility, trust, and prominence in their several communities. You are a lawyer, a man held in high esteem for your professional skill and personal integrity. I ask you, then, will you undertake to bring these men to justice? You should be able to reproduce the salient points of my story. You have even proofs in the shape of the articles now in your coat pocket. There is the fact of my disappearance. That made a furor at the time, and has never been explained or cleared up. You have the evidence of the hotel register for my being here on that date, and it would not be hard to prove that these men were in my company. But above all else, I would pin my faith for a conviction upon the mere recounting in the presence of these four, duly subpenaed, of my story as I have told it to you. That would fasten their guilt upon them to the satisfaction of any judge and jury. They would be crying aloud for mercy and groveling in abject superstitious fear long before you had finished the account of precisely what they had done. Or, three of them could be confronted with an alleged confession made by the other. Will you undertake to right this festering wrong, Mr. Callender, and give me peace? Your professional obligation to promote justice and set wrong right should conspire with your character to cause you to agree."

"I will do so, with all my heart," replied Mr. Callender, holding out his hand.

But before the other could take it, there came another knocking on the door of the hotel room. Slightly startled, Mr. Callender went to the door and threw it open. One of the hotel servants reminded him that he had asked to be called, and that it was the hour specified. Mr. Callender thanked and feed the man, and turning back into the room found himself alone.

He went to the fireplace and sat down. He looked fixedly at the smoldering fire in the grate. He went over to the wardrobe and felt in his coat pocket in search of negative evidence that he had been dreaming, but his hand encountered the bag which had been the lining of a trousers pocket. He drew it out and spread a second time that morning on the table the various articles which it contained. . . .

After an early breakfast Mr. Callender asked for permission to examine the register for the year 1896. He found that Charles Bellinger of Biloxi had registered on the afternoon of the twenty-third of December and had been assigned room 28. He had no time for further inquiries, and, thanking the obliging clerk, he hastened to the railway station and resumed his journey north.

During the journey his mind refused to occupy itself with anything except his strange experience. He reached his destination in a state of profound preoccupation.

As soon as his professional engagements allowed him the leisure to do so, he began his inquiries by having looked up the owners of those names which were deeply imprinted in his memory. He was obliged to stop there because an unprecedented quantity of new legal business claimed his more immediate attention. He was aware that this particular

(Please turn to page 266)

Coming Next Month

A VELVET-FOOTED shadow, Conan melted into the thickets. He approached the lotus grove by a circuitous movement, and scarcely the rustle of a leaf proclaimed his passing. At the edge of the trees he halted suddenly, crouched like a suspicious panther among the deep shrubs. Ahead of him, among the dense leaves, showed a pallid oval, dim in the uncertain light. It might have been one of the great white blossoms which shone thickly among the branches. But Conan knew that it was a man's face. And it was turned toward him. He shrank quickly deeper into the shadows. Had Zargheba seen him? The man was looking directly toward him. Seconds passed. That dim face had not moved. Conan could make out the dark ruft below, that was the short black beard

And suddenly Conan was aware of something unnatural. Zargheba, he knew, was not a tall man. Standing erect, his head would scarcely top the Cimmerian's shoulder; yet that face was on a level with Conan's own. Was the man standing on something? Conan bent and peered toward the ground below the spot where the face showed, but his vision was blocked by undergrowth and the thick boles of the trees. But he saw something else, and he stiffened. Through a slot in the underbrush he glimpsed the stem of the tree under which, apparently, Zargheba was standing. The face was directly in line with that tree. He should have seen below that face, not the tree-trunk, but Zargheba's body—there was no body there.

Suddenly tenser than a tiger that stalks its prey, Conan glided deeper into the thicket, and a moment later drew aside a leafy branch and glared at the face that had not moved. Nor would it ever move again, of its own volition. He looked on Zargheba's severed head, suspended from the branch of the tree by its own long black hair. . . .

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RULERS OF THE FUTURE

By PAUL ERNST

March Weird Tales . . . Out March 1

(Continued from page 264)

period in his professional career was one vital to his future, and he slaved painstakingly at the affairs of his clients. His diligence was rewarded by a series of conspicuous legal successes, and his reputation became greatly enhanced. This heavy preoccupation could not fail to dull somewhat the sharp impression which the adventure in the hotel bedroom had made upon his mind, and the contents of the trousers pocket remained locked in his safe-deposit box undisturbed while he settled the affairs of the Rockland Oil Corporation and fought through the Appellate Division the conspicuous case of Burnet vs. De Castro, et al.

It was in the pursuit of a vital piece of evidence in this last-named case that his duties called him south again. Having obtained the evidence, he started home, and again found it expedient to break the long journey northward, at Jackson. It was not, though, until he was actually signing the register that he noted that it was the twenty-third of December, the actual date with which Mr. Bellinger's singular narrative had been concerned.

He did not ask for any particular room this time. He felt a chill of vague apprehension, as if there awaited him an accounting for some laxity, a feeling which recalled the occasional lapses of his remote childhood. He smiled, but this whimsical idea was quickly replaced by a somber apprehension which he could not shake off, and which emanated from the realization that the clerk by some strange fatality had again assigned him room 28 —the room with the fireplace. He thought of asking for another room, but could not think of any reasonable excuse. He sighed and felt a positive sinking at the heart when he saw the figures written down at the edge of the page; but he said nothing. If he shrank from this room's occupancy, this room with its frightful secret shared by him alone of this world's company with the four guilty men who were still at large because of his failure to keep his promise, he was human enough and modern enough in his ideas to shrink still more from the imputation of oddity which his refusal of the room on no sensible grounds would inevitably suggest.

He went up to his room, and, as it was a cold night outside, ordered the fire to be made up. . . .

When the hotel servant rapped on his door in the morning there was no answer, and after several attempts to arouse the occupant the man reported his failure at the office. Later another attempt was made, and, this proving equally ineffectual, the door was forced with the assistance of a locksmith.

Mr. Callender's body was found lying with the head in the grate. He had been, it appeared, strangled, for the marks of a pair of hands were deeply imprinted on his throat. The fingers had sunk deeply into the bluish, discolored flesh, and the coroner's jury noted the unusual circumstance when they sent out a description of the murderer confined to this peculiarity, that these marks indicated that the murderer (who was never discovered) possessed very long thin fingers, the index fingers being almost or quite as long as the middle fingers.

Witches

By DONNA KELLY

Witches in the candlelight,
  Drumming with a broom;
Witches in the firelight,
  Humming a weird tune;
Witches breathing in my face,
  When I was little more
Than a day within this world,
  And aged me by a score.

Witches then within my head,
  Peering out my eyes;
Witches pouring in my ears
  Mystic words and sighs;
Witches breathing on my face
  At my day of birth,
Knowing then that I should be
  A child of little worth.

Witches tracking me to school,
  Writing in my books;
Witches plucking at my coat,
  Giving leering looks.
'T was my Granny who caught on,
  Put my play to stop.
Granny called an idle brain
  The devil's work-shop.

Witches getting in my work,
  Tangling up my thread;
Witches taking out my pins,
  Bringing books instead,
Taunting me with mystic signs
  Since my day of birth:
They foresaw that I should be
  A child of little worth.

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OUR December issue was well received by you, the readers, if we can judge by your votes and letters to the Eyrie. We are constantly striving to make this magazine just what you want, for the magazine belongs to you. Every letter we receive is carefully read, and your suggestions are often the subject of office conferences.

Weirder and Weirder

Philip Sibellio, of New York City, writes to the Eyrie: "Although I have never written to you before, I am, and have been, a regular reader of WT for the past eight and one-half years. Believe me, WEIRD TALES is the best magazine of all. When it comes to reading stories of excitement and action, this magazine has it and more. No matter how weird and spooky your stories are, they can't come any too weird for me."

A Superior Magazine

George Connel, of Brooklyn, writes to the Eyrie: "I have read only a few issues of WEIRD TALES, but I have read enough to know that I have, at last, discovered a really superior type of magazine. Congratulations! Mr. Howard's story, *A Witch Shall Be Born,* was a humdinger. Good for him. The cover paintings are excellent. They are weird, and a credit to your fine magazine. The nudes are not objectionable, for they are not vulgarly exaggerated, and therefore should arouse no adverse comment among your readers. Please continue them. . . . You have a fine magazine, and I am pleased to inform you that I will continue to be a steady subscriber."

Our Best Authors

Sam Howard, of Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, writes: "I consider Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard (especially his Conan stories) and Seabury Quinn as about your best regular authors. I believe your best issue was that for July, 1933. It contained Seabury Quinn's *The Hand of Glory,* Hazel Heald's *The Horror in the Museum,* and H. P. Lovecraft's *The Dreams in the Witch-House,* all top-notchers."

Mrs. Margaret Brundage

Thelma Zander of Ionia, Michigan, writes to the Eyrie: "Please excuse my writing with pencil, but I just finished reading my magazine and the Eyrie, and I just have to tell you how much I like it. I've taken it since just after it started, and have every issue since 1928. I like to read some of the stories over once in a while. Brundage's covers are wonderful. By the way, I've heard her (or him) mentioned as Mrs., also as Mr. Now, which is it? Don't ever lose that artist. . . . Please don't change a thing about the magazine, unless you publish it twice a month. I think it's a perfect magazine." [Our cover-design artist is Mrs. Margaret Brundage. She is married, has a son in school, and lives in Chicago with her husband.—THE EDITOR.]

A Sigh of Regret

M. T. Lowe, of Wilmington, Delaware, writes: "A three-year reader of WEIRD TALES, I look forward to every issue with the utmost of enjoyment and pleasure. There are, I maintain, no better stories for holding one's interest from beginning to end. It is the only magazine I lay down with a sigh of regret. *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* is an excellent serial, far surpassing the majority of serials. *A Witch Shall Be Born* was the most exciting WT novelette I have read in a long while, though any story that characterizes the inimitable Conan is above par. I

particularly like, however, the short short-stories that bring up the rear of each issue, those that can be read through in a few minutes. Why don't you run about six per issue?"

The Twelve Best Stories

B. M. Reynolds of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "What do you consider the twelve best stories that have ever appeared in WEIRD TALES? Why not take a vote among the readers and reprint each month one of the dozen picked by popular vote, not including, of course, those already reprinted? The result of a contest of this sort should be interesting. And regarding reprints, please don't overlook John Martin Leahy's tale of cosmic horror, *In Amundsen's Tent*, number one on the list. . . . WEIRD TALES for December was exceptional, on a par with your issue for last July. Your publication has shown steady improvement throughout 1934, while your rivals have been slowly slipping into a rut. Yours was the original magazine in the fantastic field, and most of your stories reflect this high standard of originality. . . . I was greatly pleased at the return of Bassett Morgan to your pages. I have always admired his work, and found his latest, *The Vengeance of Ti Fong*, to be the best tale in the issue and almost as good as an earlier story by him, *Bimini*, which I hope you will, some day, see fit to reprint."

Robert E. Howard's Poetry

William E. Springhorn, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "I would very much like to know if Robert E. Howard in his stories about Conan the Cimmerian composes the poetry himself or if it is taken from another author. Some of the poetry is excellent, but it is never entire. I would like to know the author's name and where the poetry may be obtained." [The poetry which Robert E. Howard often uses to introduce his chapters is written by himself, except where due credit to the author is given.—THE EDITOR.]

We Should Copy Liberty?

Henry Kuttner, of Hollywood, California, writes: "Here's an idea which has been tried successfully in such magazines as *Liberty:* a serial written by a group of the most well-known writers, each one writing an installment. Why not let 'em dope out a plot, and

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By ARTHUR B. REEVE

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then let Quinn, Howard, Smith, Morgan, Ernst, Lovecraft, and the other bards bring their pet characters into the story? Imagine de Grandin, What-a-Man Conan, Northwest Smith—the Three Occult Musketeers—battling spooks from Yuggoth, elementals from Cimmeria, Cave's lively vindictive corpses, and the rest of the merry throng." [That's an idea. It may not be a good one, but you'll have to admit it's an idea. What do you, the rest of our readers, think of it? Maybe it's a good idea, at that.—THE EDITOR.]

A Witch Shall Be Born

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes to the editor: "The December issue is, as Ben Bernie would say, a swell number. For first place I pick *A Witch Shall Be Born.* This is one of Robert E. Howard's best Conan tales and it certainly is full of fast-moving, exciting and thrilling episodes. His description of Conan on the cross causes one to feel the agony suffered by the giant barbarian. I like especially well the conclusion, where Conan leaves Constantius nailed to the cross to be devoured by the vultures—a fitting revenge for Conan."

Jirel of Joiry

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "About C. L. Moore and *The Black God's Kiss:* that Amazon, Jirel, is a gal after[illegible]ds own heart, by gum. Somehow I always pre[illegible]ferred women of that type, to clinging vines, or sweet little ones who shudder at the thought of killing a fly. Of course, it isn't supposed to be nice for women to curse a blue streak as Jirel did, but, shucks, it makes her all the more interesting (to me). And now we find Jirel again in this issue (December). Gosh, I could stand her for every issue, and keep yelling for more. She's just that kind of a girl. What more can I say but that I am immensely fond of her, and stand a bit in awe of such a maid, although fictitious? Long live C. L. Moore, who has the ability to create su[illegible] say namic chaown—as Jirel of Joiry and N[illegible] quite out of place as sky spaces. I must al[illegible]. Let's have more of Howard for his new[illegible]y vote is as follows: brave man as Cona[illegible]*ck God's Shadow;* 3rd, [illegible]tion, but, doggone [illegible]*orn.*"

men in our times. M[illegible]

any depression. Conan, [illegible]ssue

dynamic character — what w[illegible]

should the two ever meet som[illegible] California,

maybe I'm crazy. I don't know, I [illegible] issue cer-

but I'd do without all my other[illegible] Smith's

matter rather than give up WT. It [illegible]ace by a

from the realm of harsh reality to e[illegible] when I

gardens that no man can ever conceiv[illegible]otes—I

than in his mind. To descend the [illegible]ld take

[illegible]cond

My favorite stories in the February WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1) _____	_____
(2) _____	_____
(3) _____	_____

I do not like the following stories:

(1) _____ Why? _____

(2) _____ _____

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other-dimensional spiral with Jirel, to dash over mountain and stream with Conan, to escape the unnamable horrors of Clark Ashton Smith, and try to pierce the uncanny taboos of Africa and barbarian countries—that is something that can make me lose all sense of time and place and just live the stories. So all I can add is: long live WT and its writers of bizarre and unusual tales."

Jirel and Northwest Smith

Alvin Earl Perry, of Rockdale, Texas, writes: "Jirel of Joiry, that new C. L. Moore sensation, certainly deserves praise for *Black God's Shadow*. This tale surpasses *The Black God's Kiss*, and makes me think that perhaps Jirel would be as good as Northwest Smith after all. It would surely make a yarn if the two Moore characters could be brought together in one tale; but of course that is impossible, since one lives in the past and the other in the far future. Still, C. L. Moore can do some mighty wonderful things with pen and ink. If *A Witch Shall Be Born* is any indication, Conan is still his bloody, lovable self. Robert E. Howard can always be trusted to furnish all the gore needed to satisfy even the most uncouth tastes; and my tastes are most uncouth in this respect. Every blood-dripping line of every heroic page in this latest Howard orgy is delightfully 'disemboweling', so to speak; in other words, I think the yarn is swell! The other yarns, with the exception of Smith's *Xeethra*, were only average. But any story which is only average in WEIRD TALES would be exceptional in many other publications."

The Cloven Hoof

S. J. Friscia, of New York City, writes to the Eyrie: "I give credit to Arlton Eadie for his serial story, *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*. It is a story that keeps your interest to the end. I like a story that has a tinge of mystery. I hope this author contributes another such story."

A Writer's Writer

Hal K. Wells, of Athens, Ohio, writes: "I can't help tossing a wreath of laurel to you for having acquired C. L. Moore. He is the most startling discovery in the weird field since Lovecraft's first work. If ever a 'writer's

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NEXT MONTH

JULHI

By C. L. MOORE

THE tale of Northwest Smith's scars would make a saga. From head to foot his brown and sunburnt hide was scored with the marks of battle. The eye of a connoisseur would recognize the distinctive tracks of knife and talon and ray-burn, the slash of the Martian drylander *cring,* the clean, thin stab of the Venusian stiletto, the crisscross lacing of Earth's penal whip. But one or two scars that he carried would have baffled the most discerning eye. The curious, convoluted red circlet, for instance, like some bloody rose, on the left side of his chest just where the beating of his heart stirred the sun-darkened flesh . . .

THIS is a tale to make your pulses tingle, a story of cosmic sensations never known before to mortal man. And through it all stalks the strange figure of Northwest Smith, hero of "Shambleau" and "Black Thirst." This weird novelette will be printed complete

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writer' existed, Moore is one. He succeeds in describing the indescribable. . . . *The Black God's Kiss* was in every respect the finest weird story I have ever read."

Thumbs Down on Nudes

Duane W. Rimel, of Asotin, Washington, writes: "The December issue of WEIRD TALES is really excellent in every way; Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith and C. L. Moore being outstanding. The reprint, *Pale Pink Porcelain* by Frank Owen, was a strange story, while special attention should be called, I think, to *The Werewolf's Howl* by Brooke Byrne. On the question of nudes for the covers, I would say thumbs down—the girls are pretty, but quite out of place as front-page decorations. Let's have more of St. John's covers. My vote is as follows: 1st, *Xeethra;* 2nd, *Black God's Shadow;* 3rd, *A Witch Shall Be Born.*"

The December Issue

Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California, writes: "Your December 1934 issue certainly went over big. Clark Ashton Smith's beautiful tale, *Xeethra,* takes first place by a tremendous margin. It surprized me when I saw the result of the October votes—I thought that *The Seven Geases* would take first place. Robert E. Howard takes second with *A Witch Shall Be Born.* But it seems to me that Mr. Howard has been getting altogether too many covers for 1934. Why not distribute the covers a bit more evenly? John Flanders' *The Graveyard Duchess* was next in line; despite its briefness, it was well written, and the hackneyed vampire plot was given a new twist. More from Flanders. The Frank Owen reprint was quite good; it is this type of story that we readers want for reprint."

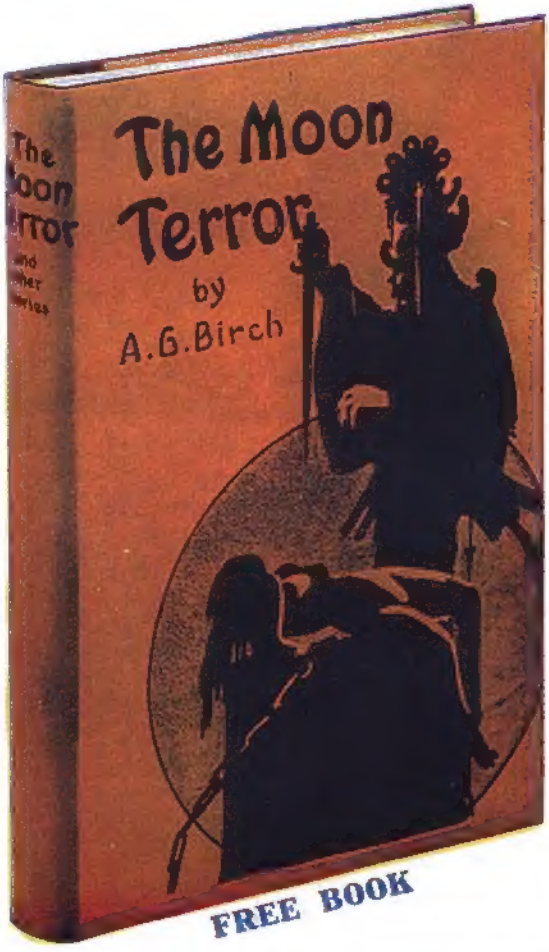
Most Popular Story

Readers, we would like to have you let us know which story you like best in this issue. Write a letter, or fill out the vote coupon on page 270, and mail it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. Your favorite story in the December issue, as shown by your votes and letters to the Eyrie, was Robert E. Howard's novelet about Conan: *A Witch Shall Be Born.*

W. T.—8

A Sinister Voice from the Ether

Threatens the Lives of All Mankind



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